

Bungo Stray Dogs, Vol. 4: 55 Minutes

**Kafka Asagiri
Sango Harukawa**

VISIT...

LANZAROTE
Caliente.COM

BUNGO STRAY DOGS

KAFKA ASAGIRI Illustration by SANGO HARUKAWA

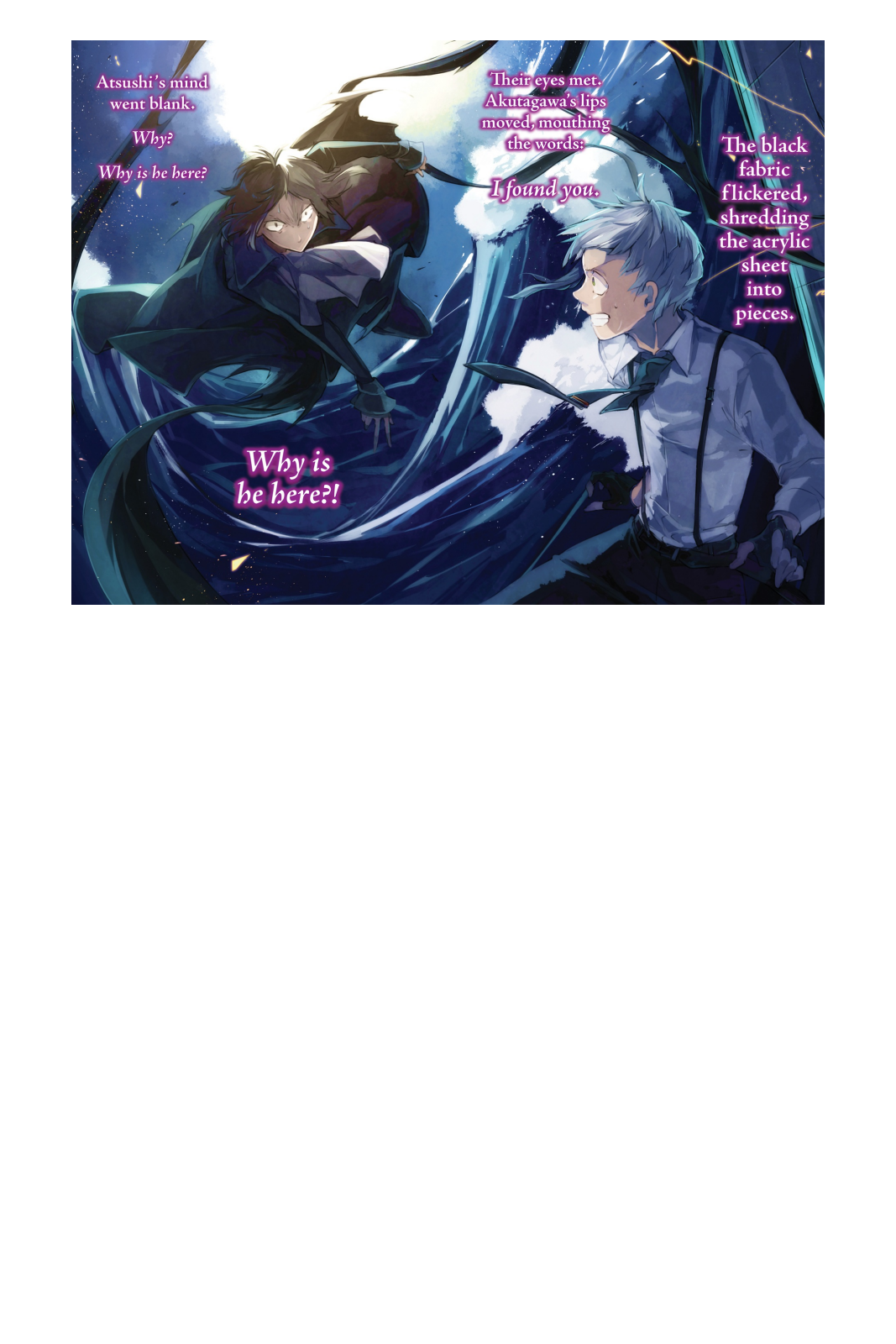


B U N G O

STRAY DOGS

55 Minutes





Atsushi's mind
went blank.

Why?

Why is he here?

Their eyes met.
Akutagawa's lips
moved, mouthing
the words:

I found you.

The black
fabric
flickered,
shredding
the acrylic
sheet
into
pieces.

*Why is
he here?!*

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KAFKA ASAGIRI

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KAFKA ASAGIRI

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BUNGO STRAY DOGS Vol. 4 55 MINUTES

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55 Minutes

Yokohama ceased to exist that day.

The blue buildings in the administrative district melted to the ground like sugar in a frying pan. The chemical complex on the coast instantly evaporated as if it had touched the surface of the sun. The cars nicely lined up on the pavement turned into gray hazes of heat and vanished along with the people inside as if God had suddenly revoked their existence on a mere whim.

Even the boy gazing at the vast blue sky out the window...

Even the couples holding hands while walking along the beach...

Even the criminals scheming in their underground lair...

Everything, in that single moment, ceased to exist without warning. Nobody was even given a chance to experience the fear that they would be no more. Like a magic trick, everything disappeared at the drop of a hat. But unlike a magic trick, a magician's suggestive wink could not bring it back, for the missing city with a radius of twenty-two miles and a population close to four million would never return to normal again.

At the blast's epicenter off the coast of Yokohama, the intense heat left nothing behind. Everything was whisked far away to the land of forever. All that was left was the simmering crimson liquid crust of the earth, the haze that wavered like the lost souls of the dead, and the deep-blue summer sky that stretched all the way to the heavens.

It was eerily quiet. There was even a feeling of loneliness in the air. Only the vivid-white summertime cumulus clouds leisurely drifted across the firmament, carried by the winds possessing no concern over the disappearance of the massive city.

___It was summer.

The first act in this tale of death and destruction began a mere...
...fifty-five minutes ago.



It was fifty-five minutes before Yokohama was wiped out. Atsushi Nakajima was aboard a boat in the ocean. The high-speed ferry cut through the waves, splashing white streams of water from each side. Atsushi stood at the bow, embracing the briny breeze.

The sky was blue, and the ocean seemed endless. The sunlight was hot, and the water was cold. It was such nice weather that one would have to assume something good was going to happen today.

"Atsushi, what are you doing standing on the bow?! If you fall overboard, we're leaving you behind!"

Atsushi turned around at the sound of the voice coming from inside the vessel.

"I've never been on such a fast boat before, Kunikida! It feels so good! The weather's nice, and we're going so fast!"

The young man with glasses called Kunikida frowned, head poking out from the cabin door.

"Thank you for stating the obvious. I have eyes, you know," replied Kunikida as he pulled a notebook out of his pocket and opened it. "There is a zero percent chance of rainfall today. Southerly winds followed by southeasterly winds. The waves will range from three feet to five feet tall. In addition—"

"You really do write everything down in that notebook..."

"My entire schedule is written in here, and there is nothing better than everything going as planned. That said, there was one time where the weather report was wrong, so I had to break into the meteorological bureau."

Without even batting an eye, Kunikida had admitted doing something criminal. He then closed his notebook and looked at Atsushi.

"At any rate, I need you inside. This isn't a vacation, I'll have you know. We're about to have a meeting regarding our latest job."

"O-oh, okay. Be right there."

Atsushi hopped off the bow. Seagulls soared through the sky, squawking noisily as they chased after the boat.

He followed Kunikida into the cabin. Once he was inside, the cold air of the air conditioner brushed against his face. In the cabin was a waiting room roughly 160 square feet. Hanging on the walls were maps, life vests, and pictures of the crew together. In the center was a long desk seemingly ideal for meetings, with three milky-white couches surrounding it.

"See? The other agents are already here and waiting for you." Kunikida pointed at the other members in the room.

"Uh... Waiting...?"

Atsushi looked around. There were four people sitting on the

couches.

...*You call this waiting?* thought Atsushi.

"Mn...uhhh... I'm gonna throw up... Why do boats shake so much, Naomi? My world is spinning... My stomach is turning... This feeling swelling inside me—*blaaarghhh!*"

"Oh, Jun! My poor, sweet brother... I'm here for you, so feel free to keep throwing up until you feel better, okay? Hee-hee-hee!"

The young man limply hanging over the table in the back was Junichiro Tanizaki. He was the closest in age to Atsushi and had been at the agency a year longer than him.

Tanizaki was muttering deliriously with his pale face stuffed in a metal basin. His younger sister, Naomi, on the other hand, seemed to be eyeing him rapturously for some reason as she fussed over him. From what Atsushi had gathered during his time at the agency, Naomi always seemed happier the more trouble her brother was in. Why? Who knows.

Sitting next to them was...

"This picture's not that good. You can't see the lower jaw laceration well at all. Oh, but *this* one's excellent. You can clearly see how the shotgun shells blew out the small intestine, pancreas, and spleen...even the sacrum that flew out of the victim's body! That settles it. I'm gonna blow this picture up and hang it on the wall back at the office."

The woman carefully selecting a photo out of all the developed film on the table was the agency's in-house physician—Yosano. Each photo was of a different corpse from a brutal crime scene. One victim's body was contorted in an extremely unnatural position, while another was headless. There were even pictures of people's bones breaking through skin. Yosano kept rearranging dozens of photos, bringing them right up to her face, and letting out a euphoric sigh from time to time.

Next to her was...

"Mn... *Mumble, mumble...* Moo-Moo, you're such a wonderful cow... Nice to look at, nice to pet, nice to eat... *Mumble, mumble...*"

The youngest member of the detective agency, Kenji, was sound asleep with a smile of utter bliss. Up until recently, he had lived in a remote village without even access to any electricity and had taken care of cows, but the president of the Armed Detective Agency saw something in him and brought him back to Yokohama. Kenji was much more naive and overly trusting than anyone Atsushi had ever met, but he was a good kid who still retained his countryside charm. Strangely enough, he performed really well at the agency.

Nevertheless, he was so irritable and annoyed upon waking up that even the most callous of criminals would run away in fear.

Therefore, there wasn't a single person in the agency who would dare stir Kenji from his slumber; best to let sleeping dogs lie.

Atsushi looked at the agency members one by one starting with the person on the very end, then once again in the opposite order. Next, he turned his gaze to Kunikida.

"They were waiting for me...?"

"Erm..." Kunikida's expression slightly tensed up. "Well, I mean... Everyone...waits in their own way."

"But Dazai doesn't even seem to be here..." Atsushi mentioned while looking around the room. "Where is he?"

"That idiot?" Kunikida pressed a finger to his temple. "When we met up at port, he said he was going to swim to our destination and promptly dived into the ocean. I didn't feel like saving him, so we left without him. I'm sure the sharks are enjoying their meal as we speak."



The man called Dazai was also a detective at the agency, specifically the one who invited Atsushi to join. However, the man was an eccentric, and nobody could predict what he would do next... which wasn't much of a surprise, seeing as he claimed his hobby was suicide. Kunikida appeared to be trying his best to turn Dazai into a hardworking, honest person, but Atsushi didn't believe those efforts would ever pay off, from what he could see.

The Armed Detective Agency was based in Yokohama and made up of skill users. Their work was commission based, and they took on dangerous jobs that not even the police could handle. Most of the members were skill users—people born with special abilities—and they had the trust of not only ordinary citizens but government organizations as well.

However...

"Attention, everyone! It's time to start the meeting," Kunikida announced loudly. However, not a single agent bothered to even look at him. Tanizaki was groaning, Yosano was absorbed in selecting her photos, Kenji was sleeping, and Naomi didn't even acknowledge people who weren't her brother.

No surprises here, Atsushi thought.

Because it was rather difficult to get these quirky individualists under control. The agents usually worked alone or in pairs for the most part, but as a group, Kunikida typically took the lead and all the struggles that came with it.

"Attention, everyone!"

But Kunikida's second shout was in vain, absorbed only by the walls. Atsushi fidgeted and looked over at Kunikida, who stood completely still, waiting for everyone's attention. Nobody responded.

"S-so, Kunikida...what's the meeting about?" Atsushi asked while squirming.

"Very well. If you're really that curious, then I guess I could fill you in." Kunikida cleared his throat without even meeting Atsushi's gaze. "As you know, our client will be waiting for us on the island, and our job will be to capture the thieves on said island."

"Thieves?"

"Yes." Kunikida nodded. "With all of us there, I think we'll make quite the show apprehending them."

Kunikida and Atsushi gazed at the others in the room—the agents were passing the time in their own unique ways.

Atsushi thought: *I feel bad for the thieves. They don't even have a clue that we've got the Armed Detective Agency's most elite agents here, each with their own powerful skill. With this many of them together, I bet they could even destroy an entire town. In that case, I imagine this will be*

as explosive of an arrest as Kunikida believes.

Apparently, the client wanted this many agents on the case. They must be either extremely cautious or extremely rich.

Atsushi observed the powerful skill users in the room once more.

"Mumble, mumble... Moo-Moo... It doesn't matter that you're a cow and I'm a human... We just have to be honest with our feelings, and then we'll be able to understand each other... And if that doesn't work out, I'll just hit you with a bucket of water... Mumble..." Kenji continued to mutter in his sleep.

"Urghhh... I'm gonna puke... Naomi, could you get me a glass of cold water?"

"Of course, my dear brother! In fact, I'll give it to you mouth-to-mouth!"

"I'd prefer a glass..."

It was hard to tell if Naomi was actually trying to nurse her brother back to health or not.

"Hmm... Looking at bodies and puddles of flesh really makes me wish I had a femur to hang on the wall back at the office... Hey, Atsushi—gimme one of yours."

"Absolutely not!"

"C'mon, it'll grow back if you just drink a little milk."

"No it won't!"

It would probably prove very difficult to explain to someone how amazing these people were.

"By the way, Kunikida..." Atsushi began as if he had suddenly remembered something. "The client asked us to catch some thieves, right? Why did they come to us and not the police?"

"Did you seriously not research the island beforehand?" Kunikida asked back. "The answer is simple. The Japanese police force doesn't have the right to investigate the territory because technically, it isn't even part of Japan."

...*Not part of Japan?*

"What do you mean?"

"It would be quicker just to see for yourself," Kunikida claimed as he turned his gaze outside the cabin window. "We should be able to see it soon. Take a look."

Atsushi looked at the sea beyond the window.

"Is that...?!"

A mechanical island—that was Atsushi's first impression.

It looked more like a giant metal plate floating in the ocean. In the distance stood countless stone buildings around three stories tall. Holding them afloat was not land but numerous metal plates stacked one on top of another, which were supported by an immeasurable number of metal poles submerged in the sea. Far past the pillars was a

spinning turbine. There was not one thing natural about the island because in actuality, it was an unbelievably colossal machine buoyantly floating on the sea.

“The floating city of Standard Island,” Kunikida began while flipping through his notebook. “It was jointly designed by Germany, England, and France as a sailing island, and its territory is governed by all three nations. The island is entirely self-sufficient; its self-contained navigation system allows it to steer independently, and the vessel operates on ocean thermal energy conversion, wave-activated power generation, solar photoelectric generation, and offshore wind power. It functions as a resort where the upper class come to generously spend their money and boasts architecture reminiscent of Europe from the Middle Ages all the way to modern times. The island usually travels the South Pacific Ocean in pursuit of the ideal climate for generating energy, but it sometimes ends up in the waters near Yokohama like it is currently. In a way, I guess you could say it’s closer to a giant ship than an island.”

“That’s...a ship...?”

Atsushi stared vacantly at it. It was essentially an entire city floating in the water, far different from any ship in terms of sheer scale.

“That island—it’s like some sort of joke.”

“It’s not *like* a joke; it literally *is* a joke.” Kunikida shook his head. “Prepare yourself. Anything can happen once we step foot on it.”



A strict identification check was performed aboard the ferry before arrival: a fingerprint check and retinal scan along with a thorough examination of everyone’s belongings. They searched for everything from explosives to chemical substances and drugs. It was the kind of rigorous security check you’d expect when entering a military facility or an airport in a war-torn country. According to Kunikida, the only way to enter the island was via this ferry where officials could check visitors’ identification and prevent any dangerous activities or crimes while they were still over water.

In any event, Atsushi and the others safely passed their screening. After that, they got off the ferryboat at the wharf, passing through the entrance of the island to step foot onto its territory.

Atsushi gasped in admiration as he gazed at the scenery. It was practically a foreign country. Covering the sidewalks were navy-blue cobblestones of varying sizes. On each side of the path stood brick buildings the color of vintage wine. Each house had ornamental windows treated with lime and front porches with sliding doors. Some

even had water mills running.

A carriage being pulled by a real dapple-gray horse noisily passed by Atsushi and the others on the busy street. Erected on the far side of town was a clock tower with outer walls made of honey-stone. The massive clock hands were pointing to 11:12.

"This is the territory of England," noted Kunikida while looking around. "It's a replica of nineteenth-century London. That said, the basic infrastructures all utilize modern technology, so there's no need to worry about getting sick drinking contaminated water."

"I don't even know what I'm looking at..." gushed Atsushi with a sigh.

"Let me give everyone one of these before we go any farther," Kunikida instructed before fetching a few silver coins out of his pocket.

"What's that? Snack money?" asked Atsushi.

"...No. These will serve as our ID on the island. Our client gave me one for each of us." After handing everyone a coin, Kunikida began to walk. "Visitors usually receive copper coins, but with these silver ones, we'll be able to enter restricted zones not accessible to tourists. They emit radio-frequency identification that can open doors. We just have to hold the coin near them for it to activate."

Atsushi gazed at his coin while flipping it between his fingers. Displayed on the back was what appeared to be a god of the sea holding a trident, while the front had the profile of some king carved into it.

"Whatever happens, do not lose that coin. If a security guard ever stops you and you don't have that coin on you, they will treat you like a criminal and kick you off the island." Kunikida looked around at the other agents. "And you better not accidentally spend it, either!"

Just then...

...a covered wagon came rattling over before stopping in front of Atsushi and the others.

"Sigh... The Armed Detective Agency, I presume?"

The agents turned their gazes in the direction of the voice and exaggerated sigh. A young man wearing blue work clothes got out of the carriage. He seemed to be around thirty years old, but his mannerisms made him appear far, far older.

He looks exhausted, Atsushi thought.

"I am the captain of...sigh...Standard Island. You can call me Captain Walston. I am the client who...sigh...arranged for you all to come. It is a pleasure to meet you."

"Ah, so you're the captain." Kunikida took a step forward. "Thanks for coming to pick us up. By the way...you look extremely tired. Are you all right?"

“Sigh... Thank you for your concern. However...*sigh*...this is how I normally am. *Sigh*... Please do not worry about it.”

“*Sigh*...”

Atsushi let out a similar sigh as if the captain’s demeanor had rubbed off on him.

An exhausted-looking man wearing blue working clothes—he looks more like an engine room repairman than a captain, he thought. Still, he’s the captain, so I guess that makes him the highest-ranking person on the ship.

“At any rate, Captain Walston, could you give us the details of the mission now?” asked Kunikida.

All of a sudden, there was a dull electronic ring. It sounded like a shawm—a kind of flute often played by street vendors serving ramen.

“*Sigh*, excuse me. It looks like I have a call.” The captain took a phone out of his pocket. “Hello?”

Atsushi stared at the captain’s exhausted expression.

What a bizarre ringtone. Does he like ramen or something?

“Ah, yes! I am so terribly sorry! I’ll find it! ...Yes, absolutely! I will make sure nobody is inconvenienced! You have my word!”

The captain hung up after profusely apologizing.

“Seems like we’re both at the end of our ropes here,” observed Kunikida, sounding strangely empathetic.

“I feel like...there’s a big hole tearing through my stomach now,” muttered the captain as if even his breathing had become feeble.

“Anyway, *sigh*... Ah, my apologies. Allow me to take you to your hotel. *Sigh*... It’s nearby, so I’ll explain the details of your job along the way.”



“*Sigh*... So about your job...,” said Walston as he strolled through the foreign townscape. “I need you to capture some thieves who are trying to steal a certain valuable treasure. *Sigh*...”

“Thieves? Just who are they?” asked Atsushi.

“This island conducts strict background checks on all visitors. Furthermore, it has very good security, as one would expect from a resort island for the wealthy. As a result, we have many customers who store certain valuables here for safekeeping.”

“So that’s what the thieves are after,” Kunikida commented with a nod. “What kind of valuable are we talking about?”

Captain Walston slowly shook his head and replied, “Food.”

““Food?””

“Specifically, the most expensive food in the world: the European white truffle. They are extremely rare and worth four times their

weight in gold. Currently, we are safeguarding a type of truffle known as ‘jewels,’ believed to be the most valuable truffles of all time. They say these go for around one million euros on the black market.”

“I see. Unlike precious gems and paintings, food has one advantage: It can completely disappear upon consumption, which probably makes it easier to find potential buyers on the black market,” said Kunikida. “In addition, there are most likely far more people who see more value in ingredients than collectibles. It’s a safe choice for thieves.” He took care to write everything down in his notebook. “So our job is to protect these truffles, correct?”

“Precisely. Scotland Yard informed us that three criminals were after the truffles, which is why I contacted you all.”

But there was something about this plan that was bothering Atsushi.

“Um... Can I ask you something?” he said timidly. “I get that you want us to take care of these bandits, but...did you really need *all* of us to come?”

Seven detectives in total had been sent out to handle this mission. The detective agency usually dispatched agents in pairs, so this was a comparatively large group.

“Atsushi has a point.” Kunikida cocked his head. “So what’s the deal, Captain? Is there something you’re not telling us?”

“M-m-m-me? Of course not!” Captain Walston suddenly jumped. “The reason I called you all here was simply because I wanted to do everything I could to make sure the truffles would be safe. That’s all. I promise!”

Atsushi and Kunikida exchanged glances.

“So...um... Yes, look!” the captain cried. “We have arrived at the hotel!”

A four-story wooden building stood in the direction the captain was pointing in. It was closer to an inn in a fantasy world than a modern hotel.

“Please come inside. This is actually the most popular hotel on the island with an extremely long waiting list. Anyway, please unwind from your journey...because there is nothing to be afraid of!”

After that sudden rambling, Captain Walston ended the conversation with a soft exhale:

“Sigh...”



Atsushi opened his suitcase in his hotel room. The hotel itself was reminiscent of old London, with imitation gas lamps illuminating the room and elaborate wood carvings of ivy and flowers on the bed

frame. On the wall hung a black-and-white photo of the oldest steam locomotive in the world.

“Kunikida, did anything bother you about what that captain said?” asked Atsushi. Kunikida turned around, pausing his tally of the amenities at the washstand.

“Everything he said bothered me. He’s hiding something from us,” Kunikida replied blankly. “But work is work. As I’m sure you’re already well aware, not all our clients are going to be saints. Some have a few skeletons in their closets. But all we need to do is finish the job the president gave us.”

After copying the emergency evacuation route in his notebook, Kunikida sat back down next to Atsushi.

“If anything, I’m more curious as to why the president took this job. He was the one who decided to send a bunch of agents and not let Ranpo come. Perhaps...”

“‘Perhaps’?”

“Perhaps someone persuaded the president to do this,” Kunikida stated. “He immediately gave us the orders right after meeting with someone outside the agency. Someone convinced him to take this case. That’s the most natural explanation. By the way, Atsushi...”

Atsushi looked up when Kunikida suddenly called his name.

“I was wondering why you brought such a big suitcase... What is that?”

Atsushi followed Kunikida’s gaze to his luggage.

“What do you mean? It’s all my stuff. We’re going to be staying here on the island for a while, right? And I, um... I’ve never really gone on an overnight trip before, so I figured I should be thoroughly prepared.”

“I applaud your efforts, but give me more details—what is all that?”

Atsushi then began to place his belongings one by one on the bed.

“A packed lunch, a folding umbrella, a water bottle, a towel, some bandages, a tarp, tangerines, cocoa powder...”

Kunikida staggered to his feet and stared at Atsushi, eyes glazed over. “...I’m pretty sure I told you this wasn’t a vacation.”

Atsushi waved his hands in a fluster. “No, I... I’m sorry. This is really my first time sleeping away from home, so I guess I just... couldn’t contain myself. But I haven’t forgotten that I came to work! I only packed all of this just in case of an emergency.”

“Oh?”

“Like these *hanafuda* cards, a *sugoroku* board, a deck of cards, a pillow for pillow fights—”

“What do you think this is, a school trip?!” yelled Kunikida. “From the look of things, you just want to play all night!”

"I-I'm sorry!" apologized Atsushi, taken aback. "I-I've just... I've never stayed in such an amazing hotel before, and when I lived in the orphanage, staying out overnight meant sleeping on some dirty floor somewhere. I didn't have any friends back then, and so, um... I just, you know... I just couldn't help myself... I'm really sorry."

Kunikida glared at Atsushi before letting out a long, drawn-out sigh. And then he finally replied:

".....Lights out at two AM."



Atsushi walked along the cobblestone paving alone. After unpacking their suitcases and having a brief discussion about the schedule, Kunikida told Atsushi to go meet with the captain. Kunikida was to join later; he apparently had to do something about Tanizaki and his sister, Naomi, since they ended up being placed in the same room at the hotel due to some sort of mistake in the paperwork or somebody's string-pulling. "That would be bad for various reasons—very bad," Kunikida had fretted as he rushed off to fix the paperwork.

Atsushi restlessly looked around, taking in all the new sights. The houses with plastered walls and slate roofing, the stone gargoyle statue that gazed into the sky, the white library with elaborate bargeboard—everything looked like the old London Atsushi had only ever seen in books and pictures. It was all vastly different from where he was born and raised.

It really is like I'm in a foreign country, Atsushi thought.

He'd never been overseas, so in a way, this was his first time abroad. Atsushi felt like a character in a fairy tale. He imagined fairies in the back alley, a king and queen in the castle, and a smirking Jack the Ripper sharpening his knife in a dark cellar. As Atsushi's lungs expanded with the island air, so did his fantasies.

His eyes were darting excitedly, taking in the different scenery, when he suddenly heard a commotion up ahead.

"He's getting away! After him!" Atsushi heard someone shout among the din of clamoring voices. A group of adults then rushed past him in a panic.

What's going on? Atsushi looked around.

"Call security!" "Did you see his face?!" "Check what was stolen!"

Atsushi's ear twitched when he heard the word *stolen*. There was a robbery. Somebody had stolen something.

—"*Our job will be to capture the thieves on said island.*"

Kunikida's words popped into his head. Atsushi sprinted forward, almost out of instinct. It sounded as if the fuss was coming from the storage terminal near the port. It wasn't the same area Atsushi and the

others had gone through when they arrived on the island. This section was used to carry goods onto the island. All around were warehouses made of brick. A few men in blue uniform, who probably worked on the island, came running over from the alley surrounded by stone walls that looked like they belonged in London.

“Hey, did you see a tall guy with black hair around here?”

Atsushi was taken by surprise when one of the workers addressed him.

“Huh? Oh, no... I didn’t see anyone.” It took everything he had to get those words out.

“Well, contact that administration bureau if you do!”

The worker then ran off.

“H-hey, wait!” Atsushi called out to the man. “Um, I heard something got stolen... What exactly happened?”

“Someone sneaked onto the island!” the worker yelled back as he continued to dash down the path until he could be seen no more.

Sneaked onto the island? Atsushi wondered, confused. *So, like...a trespasser? But why would someone do that?*

That’s when Atsushi heard a voice.

“Atsushi, psssst! Atsushi!”

Atsushi nearly jumped out of his skin, then looked around. The commotion had already faded into the distance. There was nobody around.

“Atsushi! Heh-heh-heh... What are you doing in a place like this? Hey, over here! Here!”

This voice...

Atsushi darted his eyes around in search of the voice until they suddenly locked on to a zinc-plated steel garbage can at the street corner. It was painted gray so that it wouldn’t stand out and ruin the British-city theme. It wasn’t that big—maybe only about waist-high on Atsushi, if even that—and it had a matching steel lid covering it.

The garbage can rattled. Puzzled, Atsushi slowly approached. He then timidly grabbed the lid before swiftly pulling it off.

“Boo.”

“Ah!!”

Atsushi leaped back in surprise and fell onto his rear with the lid still in hand, for inside the garbage can was Dazai. He had a smirk that hid what he was truly thinking under his disheveled hair and wore a sand-colored coat that accented the white bandages around his neck.

“Fancy running into you here.”

“Wh-what are you doing in there, Dazai?!” screamed Atsushi.

According to Kunikida, Dazai had been left behind at the meetup spot in Yokohama. So why was he here on the island and inside a

garbage can of all places?

—“Hey, did you see a tall guy with black hair around here?”

Hold on...

“Hey, uh...Dazai? Are you the guy who sneaked onto the island?”

“Nice, Atsushi. You’re like a real detective already! It’s such a joy to see you grow up so fast.”

Dazai beamed, but Atsushi didn’t even understand half of what he was talking about. Dazai was an agent in the detective agency and the very person who invited Atsushi to join them, so to Atsushi, Dazai was his mentor, his boss, and the man who saved his life.

And yet...

“Everything was going well until I got on the island. Someone ended up catching me, so I immediately hid in this garbage can and waited until the coast was clear. Unfortunately, I didn’t have time to take out the garbage first, so now my entire body smells like dead fish. But getting to feel like meaningless garbage feels amazing. Maybe I’ll live here from now on.”

“Uh-huh...” was the only utterance that came out of Atsushi’s mouth. Nobody in the agency could get a good read on Dazai. Kunikida was usually the one who got paired up with him for work, which ultimately led to his endless stomach troubles. But even then, any case Dazai was involved with would wind up working out perfectly in the end for some reason. Even Atsushi, who saw it happen every time, had no idea just how Dazai pulled it off.

“But, Dazai, why did you even sneak onto the island? Wouldn’t it have just been easier if you had taken the same ferry as us?”

“There are three answers to that question.” Dazai waved his finger while tut-tutting. “First, I wanted to see what was going on behind the scenes, since it’s not often I get to come to such a peculiar island. Second, Kunikida’s recently started getting used to me and my habits, so he doesn’t even act surprised anymore. So I wanted to do something totally unexpected. And last but not least, this is part of my mission. I received separate orders, so I was looking into how to sneak onto this island.”

“Oh... Does that mean your job isn’t to help us capture the thieves?”

“Those thieves are nothing but a small part of the catastrophe that’s to come.”

All of a sudden, Dazai wasn’t smiling anymore. It felt almost as if that alone brought the surrounding temperature down a few degrees.

“‘Catastrophe’...?” Atsushi muttered as if it took everything he had to squeeze that word out of his throat.

“Right... If you see a man wearing a suit with a black briefcase and a camera hanging from around his neck, you tell me. Oh, and

don't even think about trying to capture him. He's an extremely dangerous skill user. One wrong move, *and the entire city of Yokohama could very well be blown to smithereens.*"

"...Huh?"

Atsushi suddenly started feeling dizzy and knit his eyebrows. The entire city of Yokohama blown to smithereens?

"What exactly do you mean?"

"I'm still looking into it. Anyway, you guys just focus on dealing with those thieves for now. Because I can't do anything else until you finish that. Oh, and could you hand me that?"

Dazai's lips once again curled with amusement as he pointed at the lid by Atsushi's feet. It was the cover to the garbage can he was in. Perplexed, Atsushi handed it to Dazai.

"Thanks. Oh, I almost forgot," Dazai began as if he had suddenly remembered something while taking the lid. "I learned this on my way here, but apparently there are a few Port Mafia members on the island right now. I don't know who exactly is here, but don't let your guard down."

"Port Mafia's here?"

Atsushi frowned. None of his experiences with Port Mafia had been pleasant, to say the least. The Yokohama-based underground syndicate regularly clashed with its sworn enemy, the Armed Detective Agency.

"Relax," Dazai said gently. "They rarely ever attack people in crowded places. Besides, nobody can run away faster than you. They wouldn't even be able to touch you."

Dazai smiled sweetly. "Anyway, I must be going. I'm counting on you all."

And with that, Dazai crouched back down into the garbage and put the lid on over himself. The garbage can then bounced into the air with a light grunt, fell on its side, and began rolling away down the street.

"Bon voyage!"

Bidding farewell to Atsushi with an unnecessarily cheery tone, Dazai rattled and rolled down the sloping road until he disappeared from sight. Atsushi blankly stared ahead in utter disbelief.

"Kunikida's used to this...? Wow..."



That same day, just sixteen minutes earlier...

Two tourists arrived at the port of the floating city Standard

Island. One was a man robed in a black overcoat that covered his entire body, giving the impression he hated sunlight; he also had a black cloth wrapped around his mouth as if to hide his face. His eyes—the only part of his body exposed to the air—were unusually sharp. The other tourist was a young woman with shoulder-length honey-blond hair and glasses. She wore the kind of black suit befitting a distinguished white-collar worker.

“It looks like we were able to make it on the island,” stated the young woman.

“Of course we did. Our reach extends as far as the ocean winds of Yokohama. This island is no exception. That’s what makes us the Port Mafia,” replied the man in a black overcoat.

They came to the island under the guise of tourists with skillfully forged paperwork. Their backgrounds were changed, their pictures were faked, and they passed all the identification checks through bribery or the threat of violence. The power of the Port Mafia was what made this all possible.

The man with the sharp gaze was called Akutagawa, a skill user in charge of the Port Mafia’s mobile forces. The young woman with honey-blond hair was called Higuchi. She was Akutagawa’s adjutant whose only job was to support him.

“How many are there?” asked Akutagawa, squinting.

“The data points to four,” replied Higuchi in an impersonal tone. “Last night, the traitors broke into a bank branch under the Port Mafia’s patronage, picked the locks of a few safety deposit boxes, and tried to steal all the money and valuables inside. They were discovered almost immediately, but when they were running away, they killed an accountant who was one of our men and in charge of managing said bank.”

“Traitors, eh?”

A faint smile curled Akutagawa’s lips, slightly exposing the inside of his mouth, which was as red as blood.

“Whether due to a misunderstanding or even by chance, those who betray us will be eliminated. That is our job. That is our reason for existence.”

“I completely agree,” Higuchi added. “I do not think they knew that the bank they broke into was affiliated with the Port Mafia because once they learned of who the accountant they killed was, they ran away and left most of the money they stole behind. Perhaps they believed they could escape the Port Mafia’s wrath if they came to this island due to its extraterritorial rights.”

“Ignorant fools.” Akutagawa’s smirk was colder than a snake’s, his breath more repulsive than a demon’s. “But I welcome their foolishness, for they have undertaken the great role of proving just

how wide the Port Mafia's reach is and just how serious we take revenge. The entrails squirting out of their bodies and their long, hopeless screams will set an example for all."

"Nobody stands a chance before your skill, Akutagawa," replied Higuchi fervently.

Akutagawa then slightly tilted his chin up.

"Let's get started, Higuchi."

"Yes, sir." Higuchi began to follow after Akutagawa. "Oh, by the way..."

"What?"

"This island is considered to be one of the best resorts in the world. I believe it is important for us to make sure we are both physically and mentally sound, so how about a little sightseeing after the mission? Just the two of us."

"No." Akutagawa maintained his brisk pace.

"Akutagawa, sir, I also heard they were going to hold a masquerade ball tonight at the plaza. How about we go together?"

"No." Akutagawa continued to swiftly walk ahead without even looking back.

"Sir, we need to have a base before we start the mission. As it happens, I already booked us a room at a top luxury hotel under a fake name. It's only one room, though. How about taking a short rest there before heading out?"

"Why would I do that?"

Akutagawa proceeded to walk straight down the stone path without even slowing down. Higuchi gazed at the vast blue sky with a look of revelation.

"...I figured..."



Atsushi headed to an area known as the engine depot zone after Dazai left. The island was split into four main zones: the residential zone, the test zone, the tourist zone, and the engine depot zone. The administrative staff lived in the residential zone, and the test zone was where they conducted various experiments, as the island also served as a research facility for power-generated sailing. The tourist zone was filled with music halls, hotels, seaside resorts, and shopping arcades. The engine depot zone, meanwhile, was equipped with all the facilities necessary to steer and sail the island.

The jeweled truffles that Atsushi and the others had to protect were apparently in the vault located in the far depths of the engine room. Atsushi walked through the streets surrounded by buildings modeled after modern Berlin. At the end of the town stood a clock

tower, which was designed differently from the one he saw on the British side. Even from afar, the clock could be clearly seen with its hands on 11:27. Atsushi lowered his gaze from the tower and gazed at the townscape surrounding him once more.

“Huh... The buildings around here have a different vibe compared with the ones from earlier...,” Atsushi muttered to himself while tirelessly darting his eyes in each and every direction. “The walls and framework are very square-like. Kinda makes the buildings seem like they’re made out of wooden blocks. Ooh, that shop’s sausages look so good... Hmm?”

Atsushi stopped. Three men were squatting and talking about something in the shadows of a building down the sidewalk. They were an odd trio. They were neither sightseeing nor looking at a map, instead huddling their heads closely together and discussing something against the wall. Atsushi was too far to really hear them, but he could catch a few words in the wind:

“I forgot.”

“You can’t be serious.”

“What are we going to do?”

He curiously tilted his head to the side. Were they tourists who lost something? At the very least, they didn’t appear to be workers here.

There was a large, bald man, a weary-looking businessman in a suit, and a teenager who seemed to be slightly younger than Atsushi. They appeared to be somewhat distressed, judging by their tone. Perhaps they lost their map? If they were lost, then maybe they needed some help.

It was only when Atsushi began to approach them that he realized they were having trouble for a slightly different reason. The closer he got, the more clearly he could hear their conversation.

“Boss, weren’t you the one who told us it wasn’t hard? I recall you saying, ‘All you’ve got to do is commit twelve measly numbers to memory! I can still remember the names of every woman I’ve slept with.’”

The speaker was the middle-aged, weary-looking man in a suit, his tone agitated. His hair was thinning, and he appeared to be slightly out of shape. He looked like someone who had been living on a middle-manager salary for the past twenty years. His worried expression even evoked pity.

“Yeah, I said it. So what?”

The muscular bald man puffed his chest out with pride as if he wasn’t even bothered by the complaint. He was about three heads taller than Atsushi—maybe even taller than Kunikida, the tallest person at the agency.

“I’m the boss of this band of thieves, so it’s your job to back me up! If the boss forgets the twelve-digit lock code, then you need to roll up your sleeves and get to work!”

Atsushi stopped in his tracks, startled by what he heard. It wasn’t because the bald man was unabologetically boasting about forgetting the twelve-digit number. It was because he heard him say *band of thieves*.

—“*Scotland Yard informed us that three thieves were after the truffles...*”

He recalled what the captain had said when talking about the jeweled truffles.

“Boss, you’re amazing! You’re the man! I got your back no matter what happens!”

The excessively cheerful voice belonged to the youngest of the three. In spite of his ragged clothing, his face was full of life, and his eyes twinkled with complete trust as he gazed at the man called Boss. The teenager seemed to be around two or three years younger than Atsushi.

“Ha-ha-ha! That’s the spirit, lad! Go ahead, butter me up some more! After all, I’m not just the boss of this band of thieves, I’m also the reincarnation of the Phantom Thief Arsène Lupin!”

The boss puffed out his broad pectoral muscles and cackled.

“I, too, am in awe of your authority, Boss. That goes without saying.” The weary-looking middle-aged man bowed. “However, it doesn’t matter how many times I press my forehead against the ground and worship you, because if we don’t have that twelve-digit lock code, I won’t be able to do anything about the surveillance cameras.”

“You’re worried about a few cameras? Just roll up your sleeves and get it done!”

“Rolling up my sleeves isn’t going to help! That’s why I’m about to cry!” grievously yelled the middle-aged man.

“Just use that thing you always use. You know, that round... thingamajig. What’s it called?”

“A mouse.”

“Yeah, that. Just do that thing where you, uh...”

“Click it.”

“Yeah, click it! Stop making me explain myself and just do it!”

“Nice one, Boss! Yeah, let’s go with that!” There were stars in the teenager’s eyes.

“I know I’m turning forty-three this year, but is it still okay for me to cry in public?” The middle-aged man hung his head.

It was clear what Atsushi needed to do. After swiftly hiding behind one of the trees that lined the sidewalk, he whipped out his

cell phone from his pocket.

"Kunikida," Atsushi whispered without even waiting for his colleague to respond, "it's me, Atsushi. I found the three men who I think are the thieves."

"*What?!*" Kunikida gasped on the other end of the line. "*Where are you?*"

"Um..." Atsushi looked around. "I'm standing next to a white art museum near the engine depot zone."

"*What's the situation?*"

"Well, there's this really cocky boss, a teenager who feeds his ego, and this poor middle-aged man I kind of sympathize with."

"A poor...*what?*" Kunikida sounded puzzled.

"I-it doesn't matter. Anyway, they were talking about disabling the security cameras."

"*"Disabling the security cameras?"*" Atsushi could hear Kunikida jotting something down in his notebook. "*There's apparently an underground passageway below that art museum that connects to other facilities. Which means...*"

The three men began talking over Kunikida.

"Ugh! We don't have time for this!" the boss yelled at his two goons. "Who cares if we're caught on some stupid security camera?! It would only show off my greatness! Let 'em watch!"

"B-But...?! Boss?!"

"Follow me. It's time to steal!"

The trio stood up and barged down the dark path by the building's side.

"Kunikida, they're making a move!"

"*Do not lose sight of them,*" Kunikida swiftly ordered. "*Keep watch from afar. I'm going to call security; we'll wait for the right moment and surround them. I'll be there soon!*"

Atsushi ran over to the side of the building while making sure to be as quiet as possible. Before long, the trio reached the art museum's back court. A sprinkler listlessly sprayed water over the grass-covered yard.

The trio suddenly walked off the path and disappeared from Atsushi's sight as they turned the corner and presumably headed toward a side door into the building. They didn't once face Atsushi's direction, nor did they seem to notice him when going around the corner. Perhaps this was nothing more than pure luck. Atsushi rushed around the same corner the thieves turned at. But that was when Atsushi's luck ran out.

"...?!"

Not only was it a dead end, but *nobody was there*. It was nothing more than a small pocket on the side of the building. On the left and

right were white walls; there was a wall in the front as well. The walls were completely flat, and there were no windows or gutters, either. Atsushi grabbed his phone with a trembling hand.

“Kunikida.”

“*What’s wrong?*”

“...I lost sight of them.”

“*What?!*”

It didn’t make any sense. They’d only walked around the corner two or three seconds ago. Plus, the building was about four stories tall. No matter how athletic someone could be, there was no way they could have jumped over these walls in the blink of an eye. Such an extraordinary feat wouldn’t be possible...without some sort of special power...

“Wait...”

Atsushi planted his hands on the ground, then lowered his face to carefully observe it. The grass was so soft that it was relatively easy to leave footprints. In fact, Atsushi’s footprints could be clearly seen from when he rushed over.

—*There they are.*

He found footprints belonging to three people. Two pairs belonged to adults, while one pair belonged to a young teenager. They were the footprints of the three thieves. Even as they approached the wall, the footprints proved they didn’t slacken their pace and continued forward until...

...they disappeared into the wall.

“Kunikida,” Atsushi said into the cell phone, “it looks like the targets have already sneaked into the art museum.”

“*What? Did you find them?*”

“No. But I found their footprints facing a wall at a dead end before they vanished. It’s unclear exactly how they did it, but...”

Atsushi paused for a brief moment before continuing.

“...I believe they used some sort of skill.”

“*A skill...?*” Kunikida gulped audibly. “*Any idea what kind it was?*”

“I’m only guessing here, but...”

After pondering for a few moments, Atsushi continued:

“Judging by the footprints, I’m guessing it’s probably a skill to *walk through walls.*”

“*Thieves who can walk through walls...?!*” Kunikida clicked his tongue. “*Damn it! If that’s true, I have to rethink the entire plan and tell security! We’re heading over there right now, but it’s going to take five or so minutes at best. You’re currently the closest to the targets. Do whatever you can to get inside the building and find them!*”

“...Roger!”

Atsushi looked up at the wall. The entrance was at the front of the

building. There was no time to go back and enter through there. The building was around four stories high, and there weren't any grooves in the wall to grab on to. There was no way someone could climb it in a mere few seconds...without *some* sort of special power, that is.

Atsushi closed his eyes and steadied his breath. He visualized a tiger—a white tiger. A ferocious white tiger that was the complete opposite of his weak self—a massive mouth that could swallow a human whole, powerful limbs like steel, forelegs that could knock down a tree, and hind legs strong enough to leap over a valley.

Like night cooling the ground, the frailty hidden deep down inside Atsushi grew until it was sinisterly ferocious.

The tiger was not of this world. It only existed within him. It was his arrogance and cowardice, his pride and sense of shame. The more he tried to hide his weakness, the more exposed it became, like a photographic negative. The hairs stood up on his legs. His skin corrugated as his bones started to creak strangely as if they were growing and extending. The tendons in his legs writhed as they stretched out and grew as if they were engulfing his boots and clothes. White hair shot out of his body like fur, covering his legs.

A beast-like roar escaped from Atsushi's throat. He undoubtedly had the legs of a tiger. His knees were slightly bent in a way unique to the feline family. Atsushi's long shin bones were like springs. He stood almost as if he were standing on his tiptoes as the claws on his toes firmly dug themselves into the ground.

Atsushi jumped. After leaping halfway up the building in one jump, Atsushi's feet dug into the wall before bounding once more and landing on the opposite side. He zigzagged back and forth, kicking off the vertical walls at such a speed that the average human's eyes wouldn't be able to follow. Finally, he kicked off the wall and flew even higher in the air once last time before doing a half rotation and landing on the building's rooftop. The impact left radial cracks around his feet.

"Phew...!"

Atsushi exhaled the breath he was holding in. He then immediately began surveying the area. There was nothing worth mentioning on the flat rooftop other than the wind turbines. Atsushi had to find a way downstairs.

He found the perfect path. The first floor, a massive exhibition hall, had a soaring ceiling that led all the way up to an opening at the rooftop. A few banners displaying the art museum's upcoming events hung from the edge of the opening all the way to the ground.

Atsushi leaped over the handrails. Gravity immediately grabbed ahold of his body, sending him straight down. A cacophony of screams and shouting suddenly filled the air as tourists on the first floor

noticed Atsushi free-falling. Atsushi twisted his body midair and grabbed on to one of the banners. Immediately, his hands turned into thick claws of a tiger, shredding through the banner vertically. Utilizing the braking force of tearing through the banner, Atsushi managed to safely land on the first floor and immediately roll forward with his elbow and shoulder to reduce the impact. But when he lifted his head back up, he was met with countless faces struck with astonishment.

“Ha-ha... Sorry for bothering you all.”

Atsushi put on a wry smirk as if to conceal the awkwardness. He then stood up and began to sprint after the thieves, when all of a sudden, his phone rang. It was Kunikida.

“I got a call from London.” There was touch of panic in Kunikida’s voice. *“I know what the thief’s skill is.”*

“Really?!”

“Scotland Yard’s Skilled Crime Department had the information in their database. The thief goes by the name of Nemo—a large man with a bald head. He’s wanted worldwide for theft.”

Atsushi immediately visualized the thieves. Nemo must have been that overly optimistic giant they called Boss.

“You were right about his skill. He can walk through walls. He can also bring whatever he touches through the walls with him, be it his friends or even equipment. However, he cannot walk through walls that are over two inches thick. That should somewhat narrow down the routes he can take.”

Atsushi looked up ahead after getting off the phone with Kunikida. He clenched his teeth as he ran. *So that guy was a skill user...*

The thief called Nemo turned out to be one formidable opponent, contrary to his haphazard behavior. Kicking off the walls, Atsushi descended the staircase like a pool ball bouncing off the sides of a billiard table, arriving at the second basement floor in a little over ten seconds. He already knew that the passageways connecting to other facilities were on the second basement floor. All that was left was to search for the thieves.

There was no need to search.

They suddenly appeared right before him.

Atsushi was bewildered, but the thieves seemed to be even more surprised. Each one of their mouths opened wide as he continued to rush toward them. Atsushi tried to stop himself on the spot, but his attempts were in vain. He tripped and slammed right into the opposite wall. Stars flashed before his eyes.

“Wow!” exclaimed the boss of the thieves in a well-projected voice. “This island really is something, ain’t it? Didja see that, Gab? A

kid just came flying out of nowhere.”

“Whoa!!” the teenager called Gab yelled out in high spirits. “Cool stuff always happens when I’m with you, Boss!”

Atsushi couldn’t move straightaway. Of course, crashing into the wall was painful, but he wasn’t able to react immediately because of how sudden their encounter was.

“Hey, kid. I like you. You a tourist? How’d you do that just now? Do it again!”

“Boss, there is clearly something suspicious about him,” the middle-aged man in the suit chimed in. “No ordinary person could move that quickly. Perhaps he works security on the island?”

Atsushi froze. He was in trouble.

“Don’t be stupid! Do you really think any organization is gonna hire a wimpy kid like this to do their security? ’Cause I’ve sure never seen someone like him. He probably just went inside that cannon on display by accident and fired himself into the wall!”

“That sounds much more unlikely than what I suggested...,” the suited man muttered feebly.

Atsushi grabbed on to his trembling legs while pushing himself back up to his feet. He had to buy some time until Kunikida arrived with the others. If he had no chance to win in battle, his only chance was to slow them down through conversation.

“U-um...”

“Hmm?” the boss replied to Atsushi’s muttering.

“You, uh...” Atsushi racked his brain at full speed. He had to do something to distract them. Anything would do. *C’mon, think! Say something!*

“Y-you dropped something!” he yelled.

“...Huh?”

The boss curiously tilted his head.

“I-I’m just your ordinary, run-of-the-mill tourist! I thought you dropped something, so I ran after you as quickly as I could.”

Atsushi’s head was spinning. Not even he knew what he was saying. The middle-aged man eyed Atsushi suspiciously.

“Boss, as you can see, there is something clearly fishy about him.”

“Mm-hmm. But a great thief never judges someone who’s only a little suspicious.” Stone-faced, the boss turned toward Atsushi. “Hey, kid. What did I drop?”

“Huh?”

Atsushi couldn’t help but stare blankly—he hadn’t even thought that far yet.

“I’m asking you what you found that I dropped.”

“Oh! Huh?”

Atsushi wasn’t good at improvising. His brain didn’t have enough

space to think, act, and speak all at the same time. As a result, he was rendered helpless in everything except speaking.

“Y-you...you should know more than anyone else!”

“Huh?”

“Huh?”

“Huh?”

All three of the thieves simultaneously tilted their heads. In that moment, Atsushi kind of wanted to die. Nevertheless, there was no stopping now. He needed to buy time. He needed to make this work.

“Before you knew it, it was gone. It wasn’t something you would immediately notice, but it was something you once had,” Atsushi continued, desperately cudgeling his brain before he would keel over from embarrassment. There was no getting off the path he had chosen, even now knowing that said path led to hell.

“And yet, you lost it! You lost something you once cherished so much!”

Atsushi was essentially on the verge of passing out as he rattled on. Many thoughts ran through his mind: *I don’t know what I’m doing. Somebody, please, make it stop. I’m gonna die of embarrassment. Actually, just kill me and get it over with.*

But the boss reacted in a way that went even beyond Atsushi’s fervent ramblings.

“Ohhh!” Atsushi’s confusion was drowned out by the boss’s sudden roar. “You’re right, kid! I once dedicated my entire life to stealing because I wanted to become the greatest thief who ever lived! And yet, here I am now...!”

Seeing the boss’s theatrical lamentation put Atsushi’s mind at ease, albeit only a little.

“Boss! Please calm yourself!” The middle-aged man shook the boss in a panic. “You still only think about stealing! Depressingly so! Please stop letting yourself be influenced so easily by what’s happening around you!”

“Hmm...? Oh...?” The boss’s wailing suddenly stopped. “Now that you mention it...you’re right.”

“Hey, ya little punk!”

The teenage boy took a step forward, breathing furiously through his nose.

“You got some nerve trying to trick our almighty boss! We’ll see how tough you are once I tie you up and throw you into the ocean, ya puny cotton swab!”

The sweat running down Atsushi’s body instantly turned cold. He couldn’t remember how it happened, but he apparently made them suspicious of him.

“I am the Great Phantom Thief’s number one disciple! Gab the

Whirlwind, they call me! Let's see how fast you really are!"

The teenager then pulled a shining steel blade out of his pocket. It was a naked dagger made to fit in one's pocket. Red alarms went off in Atsushi's head the moment he saw the blade glint blue.

"H-hold on!" Atsushi naturally took a step backward. "Let's talk things over!"

"You had your chance!"

The teenager sprinted forward, brandishing the dagger at waist height. Atsushi had no other choice but to fight. He filled both arms with his tiger powers, and his forearm muscles immediately exploded in size. Tiger fur grew out of his arms, swallowing his clothes and wrists. His fingers growing into massive claws sounded like a tree being twisted in half.

My fur can block bullets and knives. If I can just stop his blade with my arms, I should have a chance of winning—

But before Atsushi could even finish his thought, a piercing scream echoed throughout the area.

"Eeeeeek!! What the hell is that?! Nooo!! Get it away from me!"

The teenager fell on his rear and began scooting away.

"...What?"

"The heck's wrong with your arm?! Ack! Stop! Don't point that thing at me! Wh-what is that—like—what?! It's all furry, too! Ewwww! Oh my god, that's so gross! Boss, sorry, but can I go home now?!"

He was so surprised that he couldn't even stand back up. Seeing him scream so much even startled Atsushi to the point that he couldn't move, either.

"Sigh. See? What did I tell you, Boss?" barked the middle-aged man with a disconsolate expression. "I told you we couldn't bring Gab with us. He's obviously talented, but he has zero backbone! Plus, the only reason he became your number one disciple was simply because the rest of your disciples quit."

"Huh?"

Really?

Atsushi's expression went blank. *He got that position by default?*

"Hmm... Then it looks like you're up, Virgo. Go get 'em."

"M-m-m-me? N-n-n-o way! I am merely an engineer! My job is help with the technical side of things like disabling the security cameras and extracting passwords! There was nothing in my contract about fighting!"

The middle-aged man named Virgo bowed and retreated like a small animal.

"...This is..., " Atsushi started, then raised both beast-like arms into the air and screamed, "This is so not how I imagined it!"

It was a roar from the depths of his soul. But all of a sudden, there came the sound of someone's voice from the end of the hallway.

"But all that matters is that you do the job you were given." It was a deep, sonorous voice. "Good work, Atsushi."

"Kunikida!" yelled Atsushi.

Standing behind Kunikida were the armed security guards he'd brought with him.

"Nemo, leader of a gang wanted for serial theft...", Kunikida began, reading from his notebook. "Despite his extraordinary skill allowing him to walk through walls, his vague, reckless plans have caused most of his burglaries to fail. Nearly all his subordinates ran out of patience, leaving only amateurs and the like behind. He repeatedly fails at his schemes and gets arrested and uses his skill to walk through walls and escape prison only to repeat the same offense before being arrested again. He boasts a record of eighty-nine escapes. The moniker Great Phantom Thief is a stretch, but you could definitely start calling yourself the Master of Escape."

"G-grrrr...!" The boss's face tensed. "Do something about them, you two!"

"S-sorry, Boss, I'm still having trouble standing back up..."

"I am but a humble engineer. I will turn myself in, so I beg for your leniency."

A teenager feebly crawled on the ground, and a middle-aged man immediately held his arms out to Kunikida...

Atsushi's head was finally able to process what was going on. It appeared that the band of thieves were *far less threatening* than he'd thought they would be.

"Atsushi, contact our client—the captain. Tell him we caught the criminals." Kunikida narrowed his eyes. "Looks like this brings our thrilling chase with these entertaining robbers to an end."

Kunikida took a step forward. The security guards slowly closed in to surround the targets as well.

"Boss... Boss...! I'm sorry! I'll hold 'em off! Run! I don't care what happens to me as long as you get away!"

But the boss didn't respond to the boy's fragile plea. He simply stood on his tree-trunk legs and quietly glared at his surroundings.

"As long as I get away?"

There was not even a hint of panic in his voice.

"The great Phantom Thief Lupin had no skill or crew. But even then, he was able to pull off stunts far more difficult than I have ever attempted. The legends he created made him immortal. I am already more than aware that I will never be as great as him."

The boss's eyes were quietly staring at one point in space as if his gaze had found something far, far away.

“But I am not the same as Lupin. That’s why I have to tightly hold on to what he never had and use that as my foundation to pull myself to the top.”

Atsushi suddenly noticed something: The boss was slightly leaning forward. The fluorescent lights on the ceiling cast a shadow over his stone-like face.

“I have the ability to go through objects up to two inches thick. In other words, I can also put things under two inches *inside me without it ever touching my body.*”

Atsushi looked at the boss’s broad chest. Without even making a sound, something slowly emerged as if he never had any flesh there to begin with. It was around two inches thick—a square metal plate around the size of a book. It slipped out of his body and fell to the ground. The surprising revelation slowed everyone’s reaction.

“I would never abandon my men.”

“...!”

Kunikida screamed:

“Bomb! Get down!”

A flash of light flooded the hallway.

After promptly leaping back with the reflexes of a tiger, Atsushi pushed Kunikida and the others to the ground to cover them. Immediately, a thick gust of smoke and wind blew across the hallway over their heads.

“*Cough...! Hack...!*” Atsushi spluttered as he stood enshrouded in the smoke. His ears were ringing. The powerful explosion made it feel like he had been stabbed right in the head. He wasn’t even able to see what was happening around him thanks to the white smoke.

The thief utilized his skill to walk through walls. By reversing it, he was able to hide a bomb inside his body. No physical examinations or observations would ever be able to find something hidden within his flesh. He probably did this to smuggle other tools to the island as well.

Atsushi didn’t have any major injuries or feel any pain. He quickly checked his body, but he wasn’t bleeding anywhere. If a bomb made to kill people exploded this close by, there would have been casualties.

“Damn it! It’s a smoke screen!” screamed Kunikida from the other side of the smoke. “They ran away! They probably went through the wall!”

Kunikida was right. Atsushi groped around and searched for the thieves where they should have been standing, but there was nobody there. Only the cold floor remained. They got away.

“I’ll go after them!” Atsushi yelled back.

Blinded by the smoke, Atsushi used his hands to examine the wall. The walls in the basement were thick. If Nemo was planning to grab his two men and run, he must have already had his eye on a wall that was less than two inches thick.

It didn’t take long before Atsushi found it—an automatic door. While it was sturdy and painted the same color as the walls, it appeared to be less than two inches thick, judging by the sound it made when Atsushi knocked on it. It was highly likely the thieves fled this way. However, the door wouldn’t even budge no matter how much Atsushi pulled or pushed it.

“Kunikida! They’re probably on the other side of this door!” he yelled amid the slightly thinning smoke. “Tell me how to open it!”

“It probably needs clearance.” Kunikida came running over. “Hold your silver coin up to the door’s authentication panel.”

Atsushi suddenly remembered the silver coin he was given when he arrived on the island. Embedded in the coin was a transmitter that was supposed to give them access to places that tourists with copper coins couldn’t get into. Atsushi hastily yanked the silver coin out of his pocket and held it over the panel. However, the machine gave a dull beep, and the door showed no signs of opening.

“Let me try.”

Kunikida approached the door. The air in the hallway had almost completely cleared up.

“...That’s strange. Mine doesn’t work, either.”

“Please step away from the door,” said a security guard. The guard walked over to them and continued, “You do not have permission to enter.”

“What?” Kunikida turned around and furrowed his brows. “What do you mean?”

“The area past this door is top secret. Only those with permission can enter. I must ask you to leave.”

“Leave?” Kunikida’s eyes narrowed with rage. “Excuse me? You hired us to capture the thieves who escaped through this door. This is not the time to be worrying about secrets or permission. We will come back once we catch them, so open the damn door.”

“Not even we security guards are allowed in here.”

The situation seemed to be getting serious. Atsushi and the others were never told there would be zones off-limits when they got here. Even if they were, this was no time to be worrying about rules.

“We’re getting nowhere talking to you! Atsushi, call the captain! We have to get this door opened immediately!”

“The captain has not been granted permission, either,” said the guard with a blank expression. “But feel free to call him if you want to

make sure.”

Atsushi pulled out his cell phone. Even though they were in the basement, the phone surprisingly seemed to be getting a signal. He tapped the captain's phone number, which he had previously saved. However...

“Kunikida,” Atsushi said, phone still to his ear. “He's not picking up.”

“What?”

No matter how long he waited, there was no sign of the captain answering. Not only that but...

“Hey, do you hear something?” Kunikida asked while looking around. Atsushi immediately heard something as well. It was a flat beeping sound similar to a shawm—the flute street vendors play outside at ramen stalls.

“That's the captain's ringtone...isn't it?”

“I think it's coming from the other side of this door...,” Kunikida commented while placing a hand on the wall.

All of a sudden, the automatic door opened without warning.

“Whoa?!” Kunikida jumped back in surprise.

Standing on the other side of the door were soldiers. Not any ordinary soldiers, though—these ones were armed with large submachine guns and covered head to toe in bulletproof armor. They were fully equipped infantry soldiers. There were at least a dozen of them, each wearing a bulletproof mask that concealed their expression.

“This zone is off-limits. You cannot be here.”

The soldiers stood before the door to block anyone from getting in while preparing their submachine guns so they could immediately fire if necessary.

“Excuse me?”

“Get out. This is your last warning. Insubordination will be seen as a sign of hostility, and we will have no choice but to open fire.”

The submachine guns' black muzzles had a dull gleam to them. The dozen fully armed soldiers were pointing them at Kunikida so they could respond as needed. It felt like sticking one's head in a lion's mouth. Nevertheless, Kunikida didn't flinch. His tone remained calm as he declared:

“This is my last warning as well. Move. We are detectives given orders to catch the thieves. This island may have extraterritorial rights, but don't you dare think you can threaten civilians at gunpoint on my watch.”

Antagonism radiated from Kunikida's entire body. He seemed to be angry that some ridiculous reason was stopping him from catching those criminals. Kunikida and the soldiers stood on each side of the

doorway, glaring at one another for a few moments.

“Well, what do we have here? It looks like our guest has some backbone,” came a sudden voice from behind the soldiers. “Lower your weapons and stand back. You won’t be able to scare him.”

Like perfectly ordered machines, the soldiers immediately lowered their guns as the hoarse voice directed. They then moved to the side, allowing an old man in military attire to approach the door. The man was of small stature, and standing next to such brawny soldiers only made him look even smaller. His expression was warm, and he had fluffy white hair hanging above his wrinkled face. If he weren’t wearing a military uniform, he would probably look like a professor from the countryside.

“Are you the leader of these armed soldiers?” asked Kunikida indignantly. “We need to catch some thieves who went that way. I would like to request permission to enter this top secret zone.”

“Hmm... You’ve got guts, my boy. You would make a great soldier if you worked under me.” The old man gently smiled with the eyes of a teacher. “However, I cannot give you permission to enter. I’m sorry, but only those with a gold coin can come inside.”

“A gold coin?”

“What you two are holding are silver coins given to general staff. However, there are zones on this island that require something more—a gold coin. If someone were to enter this area without a gold coin, or if someone were to leak the information they obtained on its premises to an outsider, then we have permission to shoot them on the spot. These are the absolute rules of the island. Even your country’s leader signed the agreement.”

Atsushi looked at the silver coin in his hand. Normal tourists were given copper coins. Therefore, it seemed that copper, silver, and gold represented how many zones you were allowed to enter, with copper being the least and gold being the most.

“But with some respect for your sense of heroism, allow me to inform you that the thieves have already been caught.”

“Really?” Kunikida said in shock.

“This top secret zone has very high security with numerous surveillance cameras. Furthermore, these here are seasoned soldiers—they’re in another league compared with the guards out there. You have nothing to worry about.”

After glaring at the old man for a few seconds, Kunikida calmly replied, “Very well. If what you say is true, I will just contact my client and confirm through him. What is your name?”

“People around here call me Colonel. That’s it.”

“Colonel... So you are an army civilian.”

Atsushi looked at the old man’s face once more. While he had the

mannerisms and expression of a schoolteacher, a closer look showed a few faded white scars running across his face. He may have been short, but his shoulders were broad and muscular. He must have trained hard when he was younger.

All of a sudden, a faint scent tickled Atsushi's nose. His five senses were even sharper than usual, since he had just used his skill, so he was able to pick up on smells and sounds he usually wouldn't even notice. The senses of a tiger must still have been lingering inside. It was a familiar stench that made his nose twitch. It was...

"No...!"

Atsushi swiftly dashed forward into the top secret zone without even thinking and forced himself past the soldiers.

"What do you think you're doing?!"

Ignoring their yelling, Atsushi looked around. It was another hallway leading somewhere. It didn't look that different from the hallway they were already in.

"Get away from the door! Do you want to die?!"

The soldier's warnings went in one ear and out the other. Atsushi caught sight of something at the end of the hallway in the top secret zone—something red. A sticky crimson liquid was spread across the floor and was splattered on the walls and ceiling as well. It was certainly where this queasy stench was coming from.

"That's...!"

Atsushi's eyes opened wide. It was as clear as day. The white walls were freshly covered in the crimson liquid, which also surrounded a person lying on the floor. It was blood and a dead body.

"Get back!"

The soldier pushed Atsushi back and hit him with the stock of his gun, knocking him off balance and onto the ground. Kunikida immediately rushed over.

"Atsushi, are you okay?"

"...Kunikida," Atsushi said in a daze. He'd only caught a glimpse of it, but there was no doubting what he'd seen. "There was...a corpse on the floor."

"What?" Kunikida's eyes opened wide. "Don't tell me the thieves are dead."

That was what Atsushi thought, too, when he smelled the blood, but...

"...No, it wasn't them." Atsushi unsteadily lifted his head. The image was burned in his eyes.

"Hmm... So you saw it." The old man called Colonel frowned. "As I mentioned earlier, all things that happen within the top secret zone must be kept secret at all costs. I'm sorry, but I can't let you go anymore."

“What? Atsushi, what did you see?”

A blue uniform similar to that of a repairman’s... A weary expression... A ringtone that mimicked a shawm...

Atsushi replied, his voice hoarse:

“It was our client... The captain is dead.”



Surveillance video: camera number 15B.

Filming location: second basement floor, top secret zone, west hallway.

Time of footage: 11:28 AM, the thirteen seconds between 15 s and 28 s.

Displayed on the surveillance footage was a sterile white hallway. It was a linear shot from the right front side to the left back side. The area was almost spotless due to people rarely entering this zone. It was basically sterile.

A person’s back appeared on the front right side of the footage. It was a young man in a blue uniform exhaustingly walking ahead while restlessly looking around—Captain Walston, the client who invited Atsushi and the others onto the island. There was no sound, but based on the constant dropping of his shoulders, it was clear he was sighing as he always did.

The captain walked to the center and faced ahead. All of a sudden, a shadow appeared before him. The moment he said something, the shadowy figure pulled out a pistol and shot him, giving the captain no chance to run away or even to react. Numerous flashes of light illuminated the hallway. The captain’s blood splattered against the walls as his body flew through the air from the impact before falling to the ground. The mysterious shadow got even closer to the captain’s still body and shot him even more. Twice. Three times. Before long, the captain completely stopped moving, and another life had parted from this world. The walls and floor were painted crimson with the splattered blood.

The shadow then faced the camera. It was a man wearing a suit with a camera hanging from his neck. He had British features but was wearing a felt bowler hat that hid the color of his hair and the shape of his face. He seemed to be between twenty and thirty years old. Despite having just murdered another human being in cold blood, his gaze was emotionless. His quiet blue eyes were as calm as a lake’s surface as he stared straight into the surveillance camera. Then all of a

sudden, he pointed his pistol at the camera and fired. The footage cut off with the impact, leaving nothing but black-and-white static.

—The footage ended there.

Atsushi and Kunikida quietly scrutinized the video from start to finish. They were shown footage of the captain's murder. There was no room to doubt what happened. He was killed by a British man in a suit.

"And that's the last bit of footage we have of the captain's murder," mentioned the colonel as he turned off the screen.

Atsushi and Kunikida were tied up in a narrow hostage cellar. In the center of the room were chairs and a metal table bolted to the ground. There were no windows, and the lone exit was a metal door with iron bars. The only other things in the room were an incoming-calls-only landline telephone, a ventilation hole in the dead center of the ceiling, and a large garbage can in the corner of the room. That was it.

Atsushi and Kunikida were tied side by side to the metal chairs. Both of their hands were handcuffed together, and the chains were fixed to metal fittings connected to the middle of the table. They would have a difficult time escaping, let alone even scratching their noses like this. Sitting across from them was the elderly colonel wearing a faint smirk and holding the book-sized video terminal.

"Colonel, was it?" Kunikida spoke up. "I'll say this one last time. We came to this island as private detectives after going through the proper formalities. We even have a permit issued by the Japanese government. I have the utmost respect for your wishes, but I request that you free us from these unjust constraints immediately."

The colonel listened to everything Kunikida had to say with an unfading smile. After a short pause, he replied, "I see."

Then there was silence. All that could be heard was the quiet roar coming from the island's engine room far away. Ten seconds went by. Twenty seconds.

"...Hey." Kunikida finally spoke up after thirty seconds had passed. "What's with the silence?"

In a gentle voice, the colonel asked, "Did you know, my boy, that this island sails the seas?"

"Of course," Kunikida immediately replied. "How would I not know?"

"Hmm... Then are there any other islands in the world that can do the same?"

"No," Kunikida said, his reply once again immediate. "It says in my notebook that this is the only island ship in the world."

"Exactly." The old man's smile deepened. "This island is one of a kind. The standards on lands don't apply here. Permission from your

government, claiming being tied up is unjust—everything you think is reasonable and common sense means nothing here, like the fevered imagination of a child.”

“But even then...! As a human being, the bare minimum—!”

Fury burned in Kunikida’s eyes as he began to scream before suddenly cutting himself short as if he were handcuffing his emotions. He then calmly said, “Very well. Let’s hear your reasoning first. I also want to know why you showed us the footage of the murder. I can wait to make my argument until after that.”

“I like your attitude. Allow me to explain.”

After handing the video terminal to one of his subordinates waiting against the wall, the colonel continued, “We are part of the French armed forces and assigned to monitor this top secret zone on the island. In addition, we must capture this murderer at all costs.”

“Yes, I would hope so.” Kunikida nodded. “A man of considerable importance to your island just got killed, after all.”

“That’s not all,” added the colonel in a curiously suggestive manner. “The murderer has already been identified. We got a hit in our country’s database. The murderer is an internationally wanted terrorist.”

“A terrorist?” Kunikida replied with clear astonishment.

“...”

Atsushi didn’t say a word. He wasn’t surprised, after all. While he still tried hard to make sure his expression remained the same, he had a feeling this was the case. He had an idea who the terrorist was. The murderer in the footage was an Englishman with a camera around his neck. Atsushi thought back to what Dazai said.

—“*Those thieves are nothing but a small part of the catastrophe that’s to come.*”

—“*If you see a man wearing a suit with a black briefcase and a camera hanging from around his neck, you tell me.*”

While he didn’t have a black briefcase, he fit all the other descriptions. In other words, Dazai knew who this man was. He knew that he was a dangerous individual and a much greater threat than the thieves ever were.

A terrorist...

Dazai said there was going to be a catastrophe. Was he talking about the captain’s murder? Or was it something more—?

“He is an extremely dangerous skill user. They say he lurks in the shadows of most major disasters and accidents of the world. As a result, he’s a regular on the blacklist of every intelligence agency around the globe. Of course, every country’s government is desperately searching for him, but...”

“Never heard of him.” Kunikida wrinkled his brow. “The idea of

terrorism is nearly alien to our country, so I have to wonder what that terrorist has to do with us being tied up.”

“He has been dodging the attempts of various governments to pursue him for over ten years. He is most likely using some sort of skill to do this, but it is unknown exactly what that is. He was given the nickname the Foreseer—the man who could see into the future because he somehow always predicts what his pursuers are going to do. Just catching this elusive man on tape was a miracle to begin with. In addition, it isn’t easy to arrange for a ship to come in and out of the island. In other words, this island is like a giant closed chamber. We ended up unexpectedly trapping the elusive terrorist on the island... Surely you can imagine how high the head of the DGSE’s blood pressure was when I reported this back to my government.”

Atsushi groaned. While it was tragic that the captain was dead, this really was a once-in-a-lifetime chance to catch the terrorist.

“At any rate, that’s all the information we have—a terrorist who appears in unexpected places at unexpected moments, a murder with the motive still unclear...” The colonel paused, then quietly stared at Atsushi and Kunikida. “And...two foreign private detectives who were near the scene of the crime for some reason.”

“Wait,” demanded Kunikida, a hint of ire in his voice. “Don’t tell me you think we had something to do with that?”

“I don’t know. You tell me.”

“This is ridiculous!” Kunikida hollered as he slammed a fist against the table. “We are detectives who received an official request from you people to come to the island. Ask the Japanese government about the Armed Detective Agency and see for yourself!”

“Yes, it appears the Armed Detective Agency is a real organization,” admitted the colonel with a voice void of all emotion. “But there’s one problem if what you’re saying is true. There are *no* records of the Armed Detective Agency coming to this island at our request.”

Atsushi and Kunikida gasped.

“Wh-what...?”

“*Nobody* hired you to search for any thieves, and that includes the late Captain Walston. He never mentioned to his home country or the executive department on the island that he was inviting detectives here. There is no trace of him transferring payment, either. The silver coins you have were for painters to repaint corroded walls, but of course, there are currently no walls that need to be repaired.”

“That’s absurd!” yelled Kunikida as he stood out of his chair. The chains around his wrist jingled. “We were invited and came to this island through the official procedures!”

“Perhaps you were. But how can you prove that? The man who

hired you is dead, and you just happened to be on the other side of a single wall when the well-known terrorist, the Foreseer, killed him. To make matters worse, each member of your detective agency is a highly accomplished skill user. There isn't a human alive who wouldn't find this suspicious."

"Wait. What did you do to our friends?" asked Atsushi as he leaned forward in his chair.

"The others are being held somewhere else," answered the colonel while stroking his chin.

"Y-you think...we're terrorists?"

"If you are working with him, then I am going to do whatever it takes to get you to talk. Why is the Foreseer here? What does he plan on doing?"

"But..."

The colonel stared right at Atsushi with a piercing gaze.

"What is he after?"

Atsushi and the others were slowly getting mixed up in something even they didn't fully understand themselves.

"The terrorist...is after..."

Destruction. A dangerous skill user. The Foreseer.

Atsushi thought back to what Dazai said.

— "Don't even think about trying to capture him."

"You know something, don't you? Why did he come to this island?"

— "One wrong move, and the entire city of Yokohama—"

"The entire city of Yokohama...will be destroyed," Atsushi involuntarily muttered.

Kunikida looked back at him in surprise.

"Atsushi... What are you...?"

The colonel crossed his arms and smirked. "It looks like my gut was right."

"Huh?" Atsushi panicked. "N-no, I wasn't... That was..."

"It appears I'll need to take more drastic measures here. Sit tight, boys. I'm off to get permission from the homeland in regard to how we'll deal with you all."

The colonel slowly stood out of his chair.

"It looks like we might have to take a slightly more...*physical* approach to make you cooperate."



The sun was shining down on the southernmost tip of the island. The pleasant ocean breeze brushed against the chalky white monastery under the seabirds flitting through the blue sky. The stacked granite

walls shone bright as they reflected the gentle sunlight. Elaborate designs were carved into the arches that towered over the alabaster floors, which looked antique. Four businessmen were walking inside.

“Ya better pay me back for the entrance fee when we get back to the hotel.”

Each man was wearing a worn-out white collared shirt and leather shoes. They walked side by side through the monastery, looking as if they had seen better days.

“Yeah, sure. I don’t care. Twenty-four bucks, yeah?”

“Nice try, asshole. It was twenty-five and thirty-eight cents. Ya better pay me back every last cent ya owe me.”

“Fine, fine... Tsk. Everything here’s ridiculously expensive. I mean, twenty-four bucks to walk around a run-down dump like this?”

“Twenty-five dollars and thirty-eight cents, numbnuts. *Sigh*. The rich have it all.”

“Well, we were gonna be rich until...”

The four of them commiserated while they strolled around the building—with their shoulders drooping and downcast gazes. Poor, discouraged, and depressed, they trudged through the light and shadows created by the pillars lined up. After a few moments went by, one of the men suddenly noticed something under his shoe.

“...? What’s this cloth?”

He’d stepped on a piece of black fabric. It looked no different from any other worn-out rag, but two things about it were bothering him: One, it was oddly long, stretching out to the shadows in the corner of the building; and two, since this building was a tourist attraction, the entire area was spotless. This cloth was far too conspicuous.

“Yo, guys. Wai—”

But he was unable to finish his sentence. In the blink of an eye, the man’s body was dragged into the shadows. The other three men walking ahead turned around.

“Hey, uh...?”

They looked about, but their friend was nowhere to be found. They instinctively squared off. They lived in a world positioned between legal and illegal, so they knew to keep their guards up when they felt fear on an instinctive level. However, fear alone wasn’t enough to protect them this time. A black cloth smoothly descended upon them from above. Making no sound and showing no sign of coming, it was like a snake striking its prey. The three men were so focused on looking for someone in the shadows that they didn’t even notice. The black cloth stopped right above their heads. And then—

“Argh?!”

—one of the men was suddenly pulled straight up into the air. The other two men turned around, but there was nobody behind them

anymore. There was only sound—a moist squishing echoing from the darkness near the ceiling above.

“Wh-what the...?! Where’d you go, guys?! Say something!”

They frantically called out to their friends, but the only thing they heard was intermittent screams coming from the ceiling, until eventually the final cry of a soul resounded. Blood poured down from above.

“...!”

Without even attempting to check what happened, the two men started to run away. However, a dark, shadowy figure stood in their way.

“Where do you think you’re going?”

He was a man of short stature with black hair and robed in a black overcoat. Only his piercing eyes were white, and only the area around him was engulfed in darkness, as if the sunlight had run away in fear. The Port Mafia’s hellhound—Akutagawa.

“What?! We’re not even safe from the Port Mafia’s assassins on this island?!” One of the men took a step back.

“Silence. Your pathetic whining grates on my ears,” scoffed Akutagawa in a voice like ice. “The goat pursued by the hound does not cry. It appears that even a goat has more sense than you.”

Akutagawa’s black overcoat began to writhe on its own. Seeing it fluttering without any wind would look like nothing short of a paranormal phenomenon to the ignorant. A monster with sharp fangs, a hungry predator, a poisonous insect, a python—it was as if countless evil life-forms resided in the coat itself.

“But there is something you do deserve praise for—turning tail and running away the moment you realized you had crossed the Port Mafia. Your lives would have been one day shorter if you hadn’t.”

“You’re... You’re the Black Nightmare of the Port Mafia!” the man yelled in almost a shriek. “Damn it! Like hell I’m gonna die just yet!”

The two men pulled switchblades out of their pockets and faced Akutagawa, ready to fight.

“Excellent.” Akutagawa gave a slight smirk even at the sight of their weapons. “While killing one of our accountants may have been a coincidence, you will still get to take that heroic tale with you to the grave. At least having the courage to turn your blade on me is praiseworthy.”

“Die!”

The two men took a step toward Akutagawa—but that was the only step they would ever take. A black cloth projected through the floor. It grabbed on to their legs, then coiled around their bodies like slithering snakes. The cloth expanded as it covered their entire bodies until it pierced the ceiling, constraining the two men’s legs, arms, and

necks.

“Gwah...!”

“Mn...! What is this...?!”

No longer could they run away as they hung high in the air, nor could they move a single arm. Only half of their faces were barely exposed, but the rest of their bodies were completely restricted by something far more powerful than iron handcuffs or restraints. After stealing their knives, the black cloth effortlessly bent the blades like crumbling fine paper.

“It’s over,” Akutagawa emotionlessly declared while looking up at his two victims in the air. “You only have one task left in life: scream in pain and misery while showing the world what happens when you oppose the Port Mafia.”

“W-wait!” pleaded one of the captured men. “We didn’t just come to this island to run away!”

“Y-yeah!” desperately screamed the other man. “There’s an amazing treasure here!”

“Begging for your life?” Akutagawa didn’t even blink. “I used to bend an ear to people pleading for their lives, but I have grown tired of the blatant lies and gibberish. Save your begging for the demons in hell.”

The black cloth tightened even more. As their attire creased, the men’s innards groaned under the pressure.

“Wait...! It’s no lie! We came to this island to steal the weapon hidden here and give it to you!”

“He’s telling the truth!” added the other man. “Please just hear us out!”

Akutagawa looked back and forth at them with an impassive expression until eventually saying, “You have five seconds. But if your stories disagree even a little, you’re dead.”

“Th-there’s apparently an amazing weapon on this island.”

Akutagawa didn’t even blink.

“Yeah, an associate of mine who works as a carrier in Europe in the black market told me about it,” desperately explained the other man. “It was apparently made by a skill user engineer in Europe during the end of the war, but a terrorist stole it and sneaked it onto this island.”

“A terrorist?” Akutagawa grimaced slightly.

“Nobody knows the exact specifications of the device, but I know what they call it. Codename: Shell. But the people who actually know about the weapon call it something else.”

The man paused for a moment as if he were afraid to say the ominous name.

“Annihilation.”

“Annihilation’...?”

“They say it completely destroys everything within miles.”

“Oh?”

Akutagawa narrowed his eyes. If a weapon of that caliber did happen to explode on this island, the blast would easily reach Yokohama. Therefore, if the terrorist wanted to, they could destroy the Port Mafia’s entire turf at the snap of their fingers.

“This isn’t the type of story we would usually believe, but we haven’t been able to get in contact with that carrier for the past few days. There’s been rumors he was killed after bringing the weapon to the island to prevent him from talking.”

“Yeah! For a weapon this good, we figured the Port Mafia could buy it off us for a hefty price! Then if you could take that money and forgive us—”

“The story is too well-made for something you’d improvise to save yourself,” muttered Akutagawa in admiration. “What do you think, Higuchi?”

Higuchi, Akutagawa’s subordinate, suddenly walked out from behind a pillar in the distance. She was standing there to block the men’s path of escape if they tried to get away.

“It’s possible,” replied Higuchi. “Europe is home to many skill users, and I hear they manufactured many weapons during the war that only skill-user engineers could have created. If a weapon like that were stolen by someone, then it would be no surprise that they brought it here to avoid police authority.”

“...”

Akutagawa appeared to ponder for a few moments. “Just what is this weapon like?” he asked.

“The carrier said the weapon was inside *a black briefcase*, and it was made of an antique camera and a detonator and stuff like that...”

A camera—if a skill user created the weapon, then they could have fashioned it to merely look like a camera but be something special. The story checked out.

“What arrogance.” Akutagawa squinted with displeasure. “They are free to play with firecrackers in their own country, but I won’t just sit back if they’re in our waters. All violence and all triggers pulled here have to be done under the Port Mafia’s management. I cannot allow there to be any weapons of mass destruction in the sea near Yokohama without the boss’s knowledge.”

“Y-yeah! I knew you’d understand!” said the man, seizing the chance to explain himself. “We’ll find that weapon and give it to you, so please let us go!”

“What do you want to do, Akutagawa?” asked Higuchi as she looked at him. “Getting ahold of that weapon would be the perfect

demonstration of force over other syndicates. If by any chance it somehow ends up beyond our control, we could simply sell it to the country's intelligence agency in return for money and a favor. It would be worth having either way."

"Right?! So please!"

"I beg you!"

Each of the men pleaded.

"Hmm..."

Akutagawa quietly looked up at them, then said:

"Under normal circumstances, betraying the Port Mafia would be worth a thousand deaths. You would be tortured in every way imaginable until you regretted that you were even born. That's how we do things. However, if you're indeed telling the truth, then we have no time to waste on rats such as yourselves."

"...! Then—!"

"By the way..." Akutagawa suddenly changed the subject. "The accountant you killed at the bank—he was a senior in the profession who had devoted himself to our organization for many years. He was highly trusted among the executives. The boss will probably attend his funeral as well. I, too, was personally acquainted with the man."

The black cloth wrapped around the men tightened. The fabric, stronger than any steel, squeezed their arms, torsos, and legs.

"Gwaaah!"

"Aghhh!"

Cracking could be heard as the black fabric snapped their bones. Like wringing a rag, their flesh and bones slowly ground down, but the black cloth covering their entire bodies prevented anything from expelling.

"Out of gratitude for providing me with such valuable information—I will make your deaths quick so you will not feel any pain."

Their flesh and bones could physically take no more. The cloth suddenly twisted, causing flesh and blood to squirt out like a squished tomato. Guts and blood spewed in the air, soiling the floors and walls of the tourist facility.

"Come, Higuchi. We have a new job to do."

Without even acknowledging the puddles of blood he created, Akutagawa turned around and began walking away.

"Let's go find that weapon."

"As you wish," Higuchi quietly confirmed without even reacting to the carnage, either.

Akutagawa's eyes were already looking ahead as he led Higuchi out of the building.

"The ocean here belongs to the Port Mafia," said Akutagawa as he stared into the distance. "Soon, those barbarians will realize they

chose the wrong place to try to play god.”



“Mn...”

“Hmm...”

Kunikida and Atsushi groaned in the hostage cellar. Their hands were still handcuffed to the table, so they couldn’t even walk around the room. The guard keeping watch had already left; he could be back any moment now.

“What’s going to happen to us?”

“There are two possibilities: one good and one bad,” Kunikida plainly stated. “We could be tortured here until we start making up things to get them to stop, or if we’re lucky, they might take us somewhere in Europe where their intelligence agency can beat the information out of us.”

“Neither of those are good!”

“What do you want me to do? They think we’re working with the terrorist. They even took all our belongings, and I can’t use my skill without my notebook. More importantly, I honestly still can’t wrap my head around why that captain hired us without keeping any records. We won’t be able to convince them to let us go if we can’t figure that out.”

“We won’t?”

“Not a chance.”

Atsushi looked up at the ceiling and contemplated.

What now? The whole catching-the-thieves thing fizzled out, and we somehow got caught up in something about terrorism, so they locked us in this room. The other agents were apparently locked up as well. The detective agency is going to dissolve before we even know what’s going on.

Was there nothing that could be done?

At a loss, Kunikida and Atsushi let out a sigh. That’s when...

“Hee-hee-hee... Heh-heh-heh-heh.”

...a familiar voice came from somewhere.

“Did you say something, Kunikida?”

“No...” Kunikida’s face was pale. “That wasn’t me. But I’ve already got a bad feeling about this...”

Atsushi looked around the room. Of course, there was nobody else in sight. There wasn’t even a place to hide in this dreary, empty cellar. The only items in the room were a desk, some chairs, a landline phone, the ventilation hole in the ceiling, and a large garbage can in

the corner...

Hmm?

Atsushi looked back.

A garbage can?

“Hee-hee-hee... Heh-heh-heh-heh...”

The round metal can rattled slightly. Atsushi and Kunikida exchanged glances as they watched the large cylinder shake for a few moments. While their hands were constrained, they managed to lean their heads in closer to the garbage when—

“Boo! It looks like you two are in a bit of a pickle! But never fear, for I, Dazai, heard everything that— Ouch?!”

Kunikida kicked over the garbage can, causing Dazai to roll all the way to the other wall.

“Owww... What do you think you’re doing, Kunikida?! Your *deus ex machina* just arrived in your time of need, and this is how you greet him?!”

“‘*Deus ex machina*’? Don’t make me laugh, you incombustible piece of garbage!” screamed Kunikida. “What the hell have you been doing?! Were you hanging out in that garbage can the entire time we were being interrogated?!”

“And here I thought you were going to thank me for sensing you were in danger and sneaking in before you got here.” Dazai pouted as he rolled around inside the garbage can. “I was waiting for all the guards to leave. And now that the coast is clear, I’ll just jump out of this and... Oops, I can’t get out.”

“Good. Hope you enjoy the incinerator.” Kunikida glared at Dazai. “How did you even know they were going to bring us here to begin with?”

“Because I knew you were going to get caught up in some trouble.” Dazai proudly grinned from inside the garbage can. “After all, I was nearby when you witnessed the captain’s murder scene.”

“What? You were in that underground hallway, too?”

“I couldn’t get inside the top secret zone, but I saw you being taken away. I’m tracking that English gentleman with the camera hanging around his neck, after all.”

Atsushi gasped and lifted his head. “Oh yeah!” He then hastily asked, “Dazai, you told me that ‘those thieves are nothing but a small part of the catastrophe that’s to come,’ right? Did you know about the terrorist threat?”

“What?” Kunikida’s expression changed. “Is that true, Dazai?”

“If it were, would that change your opinion about me?”

“Don’t worry. My opinion of you can’t get any lower. Now spit it out.”

“Ah, your praise brings a tear to my eye!” exclaimed Dazai with a

grin. “There isn’t much time, so I’ll be brief... Asking us to catch those thieves was just an excuse to get us on the island. Our real job is...”

Dazai paused. He then continued with a serious gaze, “...to *prevent* the Foreseer from detonating a skill weapon near Yokohama.”

“Detonating a skill weapon?!” Even Kunikida couldn’t hide his surprise.

“The request came from a certain person in the government,” said Dazai. “As you know, this island has extraterritorial rights, which prevent other nations’ governments from intervening. That’s why we got the captain’s help to come up with some excuse to invite as many detectives to the island as possible. Meanwhile, I would sneak onto the island alone and uncover the terrorist’s pathway of entry along with a few other things—you know, like stealing a few coins that I’ll need during my stay on the island.”

That was when it suddenly hit Atsushi.

He sneaked onto the island...and stole some coins...

——“Call security!”

——“Check what was stolen!”

“Hold on. So the reason you smuggled yourself onto the island, stole something, and hid from the guards was because...”

“Yep. It was all part of my secret mission.” Dazai winked and flashed him a smile. “By the way, I was trying to steal a gold coin to get into the top secret zone, but I didn’t have any luck.”

“Wait... You smuggled yourself onto the island...?!” uttered Kunikida as if his head were spinning.

“But I ended up having no choice but to change plans and come save you, since you got captured. It looks like I played right into the terrorist’s hands.”

“What do you mean?” asked Atsushi. “Us being captured was just a string of bad luck.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure about that,” said Dazai with a suddenly serious gaze. Atsushi looked at Dazai as he stared off to a single random point in space.

“It only took a single move, the captain’s murder, to flip everything upside down and push us into a corner. Without our local collaborator, we’re nothing more than a foreign element as far as this island is concerned. This slowed me down and, in a sense, helped the terrorist elude pursuit.”

“Are you saying the terrorist was trying to create this situation?”

Atsushi thought back to the Englishman he saw in the security footage—his emotionless, unwavering blue eyes even after he killed someone.

“Yep. After all, he wouldn’t have been able to throw up a smoke screen and escape intelligence agencies across the globe for all these

years if he weren't shrewd. Plus, his nickname is the Foreseer. What if he could really see into the future? Because if he could..."

If he could...then the detective agency didn't stand a chance.

"Dazai, do you have a plan?" asked Atsushi with a grave look.

Dazai silently stared back at him for a few moments until eventually his lips curled into a sly grin.

"Did you really think I wouldn't?"

Atsushi felt greatly relieved to see that smile. This smile meant everything was going to be all right.

"Then please tell me what it is!"

"It's extremely simple."

Dazai rolled around in the garbage can until he reached the middle of the room.

"There is only one way to clear any doubt that we're working with the terrorist—we simply need to catch the terrorist *ourselves*."

"...What?"

"You see that ventilation hole in the ceiling?"

Although still jammed in the garbage can, Dazai's long finger suddenly pointed up.

"This room is underground, so the ventilation hole should lead straight up to the surface. Unfortunately, the hole isn't that big, and the sides are made out of extremely smooth metal, so no ordinary person would be able to climb up it. However..."

Dazai let out a grunt as he pushed his legs through the bottom of the garbage can. He must have opened two holes for his legs earlier on. After that, he began rummaging around for something in the garbage until he suddenly whipped out a tiny needle. It looked as if it was once a paperclip of some sort, but it had been twisted and turned after being in the garbage for so long. Dazai skillfully bent the wire until it was straight, then reached out and stuck it into the handcuffs around Atsushi's wrists. Not even a second went by before there was a click unlocking them.

"Atsushi, you're small; you should be able to climb the walls if you use your tiger claws."

Dazai grinned. Atsushi gulped.

"So you want me to do this...alone?"

"Neither Kunikida nor I would even be able to fit in that hole. Besides, you're going to need someone to stay behind to buy you some time once they find out you ran away. We need the right people doing the right jobs."

Sure, but...

Atsushi looked up at the ceiling. He would most likely be able to climb through the ventilation hole and escape. It wouldn't be that difficult to shake off his pursuers, either. The problem was what came

after that. How was he supposed to find the terrorist?

“Don’t worry. I’ve got a plan.” Dazai smirked as if he could read Atsushi’s mind. “Atsushi, have you ever gone fishing before?”

Fishing?

“No,” Atsushi honestly replied.

“This is just like fishing. You simply dangle some bait and wait. It’s the best way to catch someone who’s known for being elusive. You saw the footage of the Foreseer, right? Did anything particularly strange stand out to you?”



“‘Strange’...?”

Atsushi thought back to the footage. The suited Englishman who murdered the captain, his blue eyes—he was a peculiar man, but something that stood out about him in particular?

“*The briefcase*,” said Dazai with a wink as if he were revealing a secret. “I told you, right? He’s supposed to have a black briefcase. And yet, all the surveillance footage and witness testimonies suggest that he’s never even had a briefcase while he’s been here on the island. Do you know what this means?”

“Get to the point, Dazai,” Kunikida cut in. “We don’t have time. Just spit it out.”

“But this is what makes it fun...” Disappointment clouded Dazai’s expression. “According to my research, the weapon should be inside that briefcase. But the terrorist wasn’t carrying the weapon with him in any of the footage...”

“Maybe it’s hidden somewhere?” suggested Atsushi. “Somewhere safe where no one could steal it?”

“That’s a very good guess. But it would be near-impossible for us to find it now. There’s a much easier way to do this.” Dazai then tapped on his heel. “There’s a clock tower in the middle of the island,” he said. “It’s a very tall building that can be seen from anywhere on the island. It plays the same role as flying bridges do on ships. Anyway, I placed a *fake* black briefcase on the very top floor.”

“A fake?” Atsushi tilted his head. “But why? We don’t even know where the real one is.”

“It doesn’t matter where it is. What’s important is the fact that the real one is hidden somewhere out of sight. Atsushi, your job is to go to the clock tower and capture the terrorist once he takes the bait.”

Atsushi was in awe. He would have a chance of winning even if he ended up having to fight the terrorist one-on-one. In fact, he would have an extremely high chance of capturing the Englishman as long as he didn’t completely botch things up. Dazai was always a few steps ahead of everyone else. He had probably already come up with multiple schemes other than this one.

“That’s all,” said Dazai as he undid Kunikida’s handcuffs. “Unfortunately, you won’t be able to call me for help, since I’m probably about to get captured, too. It’s up to you to prove the detective agency’s innocence and set us free. You can do it, right?”

Atsushi knew—Dazai only asked people if they could do it when he was certain they could.

“...I can do it.” Atsushi nodded, his expression tense.

“Good.” Dazai smiled like a schoolteacher. “The ceiling’s quite high, so if you want to stand on Kunikida’s head to—”

“No, I’m fine.”

After briefly rotating his ankles, Atsushi measured the distance to the ceiling and slightly lowered his hips before suddenly lunging into the air. Clearing several feet in a single jump, he instantly reached the ceiling. He knocked off the steel net covering the ventilation hole with one transformed claw while latching on to the hole’s entrance with the other. Atsushi’s claws dug into the metal, supporting his weight. He then swung his body, pulled himself inside, and began climbing the shaft.

“Oooh!” Dazai squealed in excitement. “Look at you, Atsushi! Impressive.”

But right as Atsushi looked down into the room to say something, the door to the cellar flew open with a clang.

“Hey! What was that noise?!”

The sound of multiple soldiers rushing into the room. The sound of Kunikida yelling something. The grating sound of metal clashing.

“Dazai?! Kunikida?!” Atsushi shouted from inside the ventilation shaft.

“Don’t worry about us! Just go!” Atsushi heard Kunikida yell back amid the commotion. He hesitated about going back to help them fight, but they would never be able to clear their names if he got caught now. Plus, it didn’t matter how strong these soldiers were. They wouldn’t be able to pull themselves up and climb through this ventilation shaft. Therefore, Atsushi’s only choice was to escape and follow through with Dazai’s plan.

I’ll be back for you guys soon!

With a look of sheer determination and the limbs of a tiger, Atsushi clawed his way to the top. The raucous scuffle in the background slowly faded until it could be heard no more.



In the center was a tower that could be seen from anywhere on the island. The edifice served as an observatory, a landmark, and a clock tower. It was the tallest building on the island, with the exception of the windmills. The tower slowly tapered into a triangle. Each of the three sides was pointing at a different territory: England, France, and Germany. The walls were each uniquely designed to replicate the style of their country. Spread around the tower was a meticulously maintained artificial forest with radially paved cobblestones that led to each territory.

Atsushi walked down the cobblestone path until he was right in front of the tower. While it was a big island, it didn’t take him more than a few minutes to arrive thanks to his tiger legs. This was the

place where Dazai had set his trap. Atsushi looked up at the clock—11:54.

All of a sudden, the thought *Shouldn't I save the other detectives?* crossed Atsushi's mind. Tanizaki, Kenji, and the others were apparently being confined somewhere on the island just like Kunikida and he had been. The idea of fighting a legendary terrorist alone was horrifying. But Atsushi's train of thought was suddenly cut short. He felt a shock as if he had just been slapped—it was him.

He was briskly walking down the cobblestone path on British territory, heading toward the tower. There was no mistaking it. He had his back turned to Atsushi; it looked as if he didn't even notice him.

Atsushi swiftly hid in the shadows under the cluster of trees. What was going on? They were over fifty feet away from each other, but Atsushi's tiger eyes possessed far greater sight and visual range than an ordinary person. That was perhaps one of the reasons he found his target first. There was no time to save his friends now. He had to do this alone.



In pursuit of the enemy, Atsushi stepped foot into the clock tower. The first floor to the tower was a museum open to the public. The ceiling was high, and the floors were waxed. Displays hung on the walls, such as the history of the island and the building's internal structures. A few tourists leisurely enjoyed their sightseeing as they walked around the clock tower.

Atsushi blended in with the tourists and pretended to look at the exhibits while keeping tabs on the target out of the corner of his eye. The terrorist rushed into the staff elevator at the end of the exhibition room and went straight up to the top floor. He seemed to be in a hurry. *That's a good sign*, thought Atsushi. The fake briefcase probably tricked the terrorist, so he was panicking. He was probably rushing to get the briefcase before anyone could steal it.

After checking the exact floor the terrorist got off on, Atsushi entered the elevator to go after him. He decided to get off one floor below the top floor just in case and use the stairs the rest of the way. Atsushi exited the elevator and quieted his footsteps. It was an empty, unmanned radar processing chamber, and the floor bristled with gray nautical instruments. Atsushi thought back to how Dazai said this tower played the same role as flying bridges do on ships. It appeared that the equipment for observing and detecting radar to steer the ship was all in this room. Atsushi carefully walked among the equipment before climbing the staircase and looking for the terrorist.

There he was on the top floor—wearing a felt bowler hat and suit with a camera hanging around his neck. But from where he was standing, Atsushi couldn't see those blue eyes the terrorist showed when he killed the captain. The terrorist briskly walked around the room, scanning it with his eyes as if he was looking for something.

It was an observation deck overlooking the entire island. The walls were made of glass, giving a clear view of the island and the skyline in the distance. Yokohama was visible to the north, seemingly clinging to the horizon. It wasn't long before the man in the suit found the black briefcase on the desk.

Atsushi peeked his head out from the stairwell and observed the man's next move. There was no reason for Atsushi to do anything. The trap was made to go off once the terrorist touched the briefcase. All Atsushi had to do was wait. Nevertheless, the suited man didn't even attempt to approach it. He stood slightly away from it as if only observing. Atsushi panicked. What happened? The terrorist should have been eager to pick up the briefcase. Was he growing suspicious?

In that case, Atsushi had no other choice—he had to attack. He focused his powers into his legs.

The terrorist suddenly pulled out a gun and shot the briefcase.

He filled it full of lead one shot after another as if he was shooting somebody he despised. The briefcase burst open and let out a dull, metallic sound as if something had broken inside.

"What?!" Atsushi's surprise escaped him.

"...! Who's there?!" yelled the terrorist, turning around. His voice was like a young boy's, much higher than Atsushi had imagined. Atsushi swiftly leaped forward but couldn't stick the landing and rolled on the ground. The terrorist then aimed the muzzle of his gun at Atsushi.

There was no way he could dodge. It was a mistake that would cost him his life. But the terrorist didn't shoot. Instead, he immediately pointed his gun up.

"What are you doing here?!" he screamed. "Are you the one who put the Shell here?! Do you even know how dangerous this—"

The entire island suddenly began to shake.



The briefcase was resting in a dimly lit room. The lid was open, revealing the inside. The interior was nothing more than a simple machine—an old-fashioned camera surrounded by shock-absorbent

resin. A few electrical wires were sticking out of the camera and into a piece of parchment with ancient script written on it.

A white finger touched the briefcase, tracing its outer shell before checking the circuits inside, then switching a few of the wires. Finally, after a few moments went by, the finger slowly pressed the shutter button. The briefcase began to faintly vibrate. A crimson magic circle appeared around it as if it were slowly being painted into existence. Several other magic circles stacked over one another until the only person in the room was lifted into the air.

“...”

The person started to mumble something, but their voice was drowned out by another sound. The room itself—the island itself—was shaking at the grating sound.

The ocean trembled—almost as if something were frightening it.



The sky was dyed red.

“What...?!” Atsushi gazed at the scenery outside and shouted.

Red. Everything was red—the ocean, the island, even Yokohama at the other end of the horizon.

Atsushi immediately knew why.

It was the sky. *The sky was disappearing.* The sky, which was here just moments ago, was now covered by a vermillion film-like membrane. The sky was hidden—or more specifically, a colossal bright-red shell was blocking out part of it.

“No...!” howled the terrorist. “So this was a fake! Then that means the real one...”

“What? What’s going on?!” Atsushi still couldn’t believe what he was seeing.

“That’s the Shell.” The terrorist briskly walked over to Atsushi. “The crimson celestial sphere of annihilation. Come with me—if you value your life, that is.”

Only when the terrorist grabbed Atsushi by the wrist did he finally come back to his senses.

“Wh—who are you?”

“I came to stop that weapon.”

The terrorist then dug his finger into his cheek and pulled his entire face right off.

“...!”

What looked like skin was actually artificial, exquisitely designed. After completely removing the material from his cheeks, nose, and

brows, he took off his bowler hat—revealing a *blond woman* underneath.

“My name is H. G. Wells. I came here to prevent this catastrophe,” claimed the woman with a shake of her long hair. “You, boy—are you prepared to carry the future on your shoulders?”



The Shell covered the ocean. Centered around Standard Island in the sea, it swallowed the majority of Yokohama with its radius of twenty-two miles. The crimson dome burned like a small star that had fallen upon the earth with an extraordinary amount of heat locked inside. The fiery enclosure rapidly imploded, the heat rushing toward its core.

Simply touching the blazing fireball instantly vaporized a building. A skyscraper and an elevated highway melted like butter and vanished. Half a million people carbonized and perished in the first five seconds. The mountains and forests instantly turned into white ash before even catching fire. Even the crust of the earth went beyond its melting point, transforming into boiling, crimson sludge. It could no longer be called “burning” at this point. Similar to when molecules turn into plasma, all that was left was white smoke as if they were remnants of the lost souls. Not even a single puff of heat escaped from within the Shell. However, the city inside had been transformed into a literal hellscape, like something out of an ancient legend.



At the top floor of the Port Mafia's headquarters, its leader, Ougai Mori, muttered to himself:

"...Well, this isn't good."

He bitterly smirked while watching the infernal flames until he, too, turned into black ash.

Yukichi Fukuzawa stared out the window in his office at the Armed Detective Agency.

"...It looks like we were too late."

As he calmly closed his eyes, the melting building engulfed him, and he then disappeared.

Countless people...

Countless lives...

They all vanished in the flames. Memories, regrets, bonds, promises, records, obsessions, ambitions, love, and unfulfilled lives were left behind—and yet it was as if all those lives had never existed in the first place. There was only ash of black and white.

Kunikida and Dazai witnessed the event as they ran down the island's stone pavement.

"What's going on?!"

Broken handcuffs still hung from Kunikida's wrist after he escaped the hostage cellar.

"That's the skill weapon," said Dazai in a strangely soft voice. "Seems we didn't make it in time."

"That's a skill...? Impossible. That goes beyond the scale of what a skill can do!"

The diminishing fiery shell reached them as well. It melted everything in its path, starting with the corner of the island. Even the ocean water boiled until it evaporated, then turned the molecules into plasma as if that weren't enough. The plasma vapor, thousands of degrees hot, removed their flesh and carbonized them to the bone. Not even Dazai's power to nullify other skills could nullify the collateral plasma vapor. He and Kunikida became but shadows, burned onto the pavement—but even that pavement instantly melted away.

Dazai muttered something the moment he vanished, but even the air that came out of his mouth turned into plasma, never to be heard.



“Wh-what’s happening?! Why...?! How...?!” shouted Atsushi as he gazed at the scenery below. The island, the ocean, Yokohama—everything had gone up in flames, and the wave of heat was heading right toward the center of the island. The colossal dome was steadily heading toward the blast’s epicenter. It was only a matter of moments before it reached Atsushi.

“This way!” screamed the blond terrorist who called herself Wells. Standing by the window, she tied a wire around a pillar and looped the other end around the pulley at her waist. She fired a bullet into the glass window, creating a radial crack that she relentlessly kicked. The window shattered, sending countless shards of glass to the surface.

“What are you doing?!” Wells yelled as she waved Atsushi over.

“But...!”

Atsushi hesitated. He didn’t know what her intentions were. He didn’t know if he could trust her. Moreover, he found it hard to believe there was even a way to escape from the incoming wave of heat.

“Do you not want to save your friends?!”

My friends.

Atsushi could see the faces of everyone in the Armed Detective Agency—his friends who were somewhere inside this heat wave.

The friends who accepted me for who I am.

Atsushi sprinted. He took Wells’s hand.

“Jump!”

Wells and Atsushi leaped out the broken window together. They descended from the top floor of the tower toward the ground. All Atsushi could see around him was the approaching crimson dome that covered the sky. The sea boiled. The heat wave instantly scorched Atsushi’s throat. The seawater rapidly vaporized and expanded, creating a shock wave that was approaching the tower even more quickly than the Shell. It looked like the end of the world. Wells unhooked the wire from her waist midair, flipped her blond hair, and landed on the surface. Atsushi transformed his arms and legs into those of a tiger and landed on all fours.

“There’s a doorway leading underground in the forest up ahead! Run!”

Wells immediately waved her arm and gave instruction. Atsushi ran without saying a word. Before long, he found giant, hinged iron double doors embedded in the ground. Attached to the middle of the doors was a massive lock sealed with chains.

“We’ve got less than ten seconds until the heat wave gets here!

There's no time to unlock it! We have to pry it open!"

Wells then pulled a military-grade knife out of her suit and thrust it between the chains. Utilizing the principle of leverage, she slowly wrenched the doors open.

There was no time to waste.

"Please—step aside!"

Atsushi stood in front of Wells, thrusting her away from the door. He transformed both of his arms and began thrashing the chains with his tiger claws. After two, three hits, the weak part of the chain cracked and broke, exposing the lock, which Atsushi immediately grabbed.

"Ahhhhhhh!!"

His tiger arms rapidly grew. The cast-iron lock, which was about as big as Atsushi's face, began to creak under the tiger's pressure until the welded parts shot off one by one. Unable to handle Atsushi's strength, the lock let out one last shriek before it was ripped in two. Wells promptly grabbed on to the iron door and forced it open with all her might.

"Get inside!"

It went without saying. The heat wave was already burning off Atsushi's eyebrows. Atsushi immediately threw himself into the dark pit without even looking inside.



"Higuchi! Where are you?! Answer me!"

Akutagawa called out to her in the woods. The heat wave had singed his eyelashes. The surrounding trees burst into flames, unable to handle the hot winds.

"So this is Annihilation...", observed Akutagawa in the midst of the heat wave. His voice cracked from the surge of burning vapor searing his throat. The heat scorched his skin and vaporized the moisture around his eyeballs, which felt like being stabbed in the eyes. Nevertheless, Akutagawa faintly smiled.

"I see... So this is the end... This is my ending."

Although the trees flared up around him, Akutagawa's expression was calm.

"This is far different from how I imagined it, but perhaps this is how it's supposed to be."

The wave of heat got even closer. Akutagawa's black overcoat writhed and took shape, seemingly stretching through different dimensions before transforming into a large black scythe. It sliced the space before him, immediately cutting off the heat wave approaching from the seaside and protecting him. A rip in space—Akutagawa's

skill, *Rashomon*, was able to cut through anything, regardless of whether that something was space itself. Being sliced open with an exposed surface of discontinuity allowed the space to block anything from passing, even if that was a heat wave that would destroy the world.

“However...,” muttered Akutagawa.

The rip in space closed, allowing the heat wave to approach once more. The surface of discontinuity would close in a mere few seconds. Not even Akutagawa could block the heat wave of death forever. He walked through the woods. Creating rips in space one after another, he managed to create somewhat of a shelter around himself. The heat wave, the burning trees, even splashes of melted building attacked him. He cut through space to protect himself from each strike, creating new tears immediately after the previous ones disappeared. Akutagawa continued to walk, but even then, the end was near. No longer able to sustain itself, the island began to sink. The rumbling of the land would not even permit him to walk any longer. He dropped to his knees.

“Even if one were to bathe in the eternal wind and simply become foam in the great sea without ever knowing who they were—without even getting a farewell...,” Akutagawa muttered, facing the heavens as if he were reciting a poem, “...the heart shall not move, for it is nothing compared with the loneliness of passing...without you ever knowing.”

The Shell itself was almost hovering over him. The surrounding heat wave had already exceeded several hundred degrees Fahrenheit. No more than a puff of heat slipped through the corners of the tears in space, but his flesh instantly bubbled and burned away. But even then, Akutagawa smiled.

“Right now...that is the sole thing that brings me sorrow.”

Akutagawa’s body disappeared in the flames as he left nothing more than a smile, never to reach another soul.



Atsushi crouched in the abyss.

“Ouch...”

After jumping down the hole past the iron doors, he ended up in a giant underground room. His hands and feet painfully tingled from breaking his fall when he hit the bare stone floor.

“You awake?”

He heard a voice coming from the middle of the room. A single desk stood there in the dimness, and by its side was the blond woman. It was an unusual space. The square room’s walls, floor, and even the

ceiling were made out of bare stone. The only source of light was an object on top of the desk. Atsushi felt something was odd before almost immediately realizing what that was: The room *wasn't* hot. The blistering wind outside was scorching enough to burn hair. No matter how far underground he may have been, no place on the island should be this cool. Moreover, there was no noise. Surely even now, the Shell was scorching the island. It didn't make sense that they couldn't hear the roaring of buildings and even the island itself being destroyed. And yet, it was silent.

"Where am I?" muttered Atsushi as if he were asking himself. "Are we not on the island anymore?"

"We're still on the island, unfortunately," confessed Wells as she stood in the center of the room. Her flat voice, which concealed any semblance of femininity, echoed against the walls. "This room will soon disappear as well, but my skill is delaying time and slowing down what's happening outside."

Wells placed a hand on the light source. After his eyes adjusted to the darkness, Atsushi could finally make out what it was. It was a camera. The one Wells had been dangling around her neck was now sitting on the table, and a pale light emitting from the flash bulb was illuminating the room. Atsushi looked to his sides, then up. He should have been able to see the iron doors they came through above him, but they were no longer there. Only darkness crept into the room. The ceiling was melting.

"We don't have time, so I'll be brief," Wells suddenly stated. "The weapon was activated, and this island along with the nearby land now ceases to exist. The blast destroyed everything within a twenty-two-mile radius. The Shell's maximum temperature is approximately one hundred eight thousand degrees Fahrenheit. According to my prior calculations, around four million people were killed."

"Four...?!" gasped Atsushi. Four million people meant that almost everyone in Yokohama was killed.

"A weapon created during the end of the war known as Annihilation—the Shell—was the sole cause. Somebody smuggled the weapon onto the island and detonated it. I sneaked onto the island to stop it, but I failed. And...you know the rest."

"W-wait!" Atsushi cut in. "Aren't you the terrorist, though? And how do you even know so much about that weapon?"

"The answer is simple—because I created it."

"...!"

Atsushi was at a loss. Wells explained in a dispassionate tone, "The nations of Europe sent a certain group of skill users to war fourteen years ago. Hugo, Goethe, and Shakespeare—the Transcendents, as they were known—clashed, resulting in the most

war casualties and damage in history.”

Atsushi couldn't say a word. He knew about the war, but this was the first he ever heard of skill users being involved.

“I worked as an engineer for England in skill-weapon development,” Wells calmly continued. “We were conducting experiments in England during that time that intentionally awakened skill singularities to integrate them into weapons... Are you familiar with a skill singularity?”

Atsushi replied that he wasn't.

“A singularity is when two skills cancel each other out and create something different from either skill. Let's say someone possessed the skill to always trick their opponent, but their opponent had the skill to always uncover the truth—what would happen? What if someone with the ability to concentrate energy into one spot used their talent at the same time as someone with the ability to disperse energy? Usually, one skill would beat out the other. However, on rare occasions, both skills will interact and produce unbelievably profound results that go beyond what normal skills can do. That is a skill singularity.”

“Then...that celestial sphere was created from a skill singularity...?”

Wells tousled her blond hair and nodded.

“Exactly. My skill allows me to locally manipulate time. We combined this skill with various magical effects—in this case, the ability to create a talisman that produced a fiery shell. After combining these two skills and generating a singularity, the skills went far beyond their limits.”

While walking, Wells continued, “Are you familiar with the uncertainty principle?”

“‘Uncertainty principle’...?”

“Regardless of skills, there exists an uncertainty between time and energy in this world. With the product of energy ΔE —which occurs in a short span of time Δt — ΔE and Δt can only take a fixed value proportional to Planck's constant h . The product is fixed, so Δt converges to a fixed value, and ΔE will diffuse and take a large value. If ΔE converses into a fixed value, Δt will become coextensive. This is the uncertainty.”

“Um...,” Atsushi spluttered with some embarrassment. “I am really sorry, but...I have no idea what you're talking about.”

“Oh,” replied Wells with a nod. She didn't seem to mind at all. “Put simply...say you have a lit match. For a trillionth, of a trillionth, of a trillionth, of even another trillionth of a second, even the small flame of a match can possess high energy powerful enough to set the world on fire—the *fluctuation* of energy, so to speak. However, the greater the energy, the shorter the span it can exist. Therefore, it will

never affect the outside world.”

Atsushi began racking his brain to process what she was saying. A large amount of energy that only exists for an extremely short amount of time... A skill to manipulate time...and a singularity...

“Oh...!”

“Do you get it now?”

“So you used your skill to forcibly change that short burst of powerful energy into a massive ball of fire?”

“That’s essentially the gist of it,” said Wells, nodding. “I adjusted this camera—the machine that presides over the skill to manipulate time—and expanded Δt , thus breaking the uncertainty principle and locking this massive ball of fire in the real world. It sounds easy, but...”

But Wells didn’t finish her sentence. She let the words never to be spoken slip away into the air. After pondering for a moment, Atsushi spoke up.

“And someone—not you—got ahold of that horrifying weapon and detonated it on the island.”

“Yes.” Wells slightly frowned. “I don’t know who they are or what they’re after, but I’ve essentially narrowed down the weapon’s location—the fifth basement floor of the top secret zone, which is located at the innermost part of the island. I’m not sure of the exact room it’s in, though.”

Wells then clapped her hands and said something that took Atsushi by surprise:

“You will return to the past, find whoever is behind this, and steal the weapon.”

Atsushi was dumbfounded.

“.....What?”

“I’m sorry, but there’s no time. You’re going whether you like it or not.”

“P-please hold on,” pleaded Atsushi in a panic. “Return to the past? ‘Steal the weapon’? What are you talking about?”

“It’s just as I explained earlier.” Wells raised a hand into the air. “Existence uncertainty. Think of it in terms of how energy, ΔE , becomes bigger as the amount of time, Δt , gets shorter. The existence of a tiny bit of energy can spread from the past to the future. Just like this.”

A radial light projected from the camera’s lens and painted a diagram of pale light in the air.

“If time were a river, then the energy—all the matter in this world—would be like a ripple on the water’s quiet surface. We exist

together around the rings of the ripple. While it's easy to believe that existence is but a single point on the axis of time, we exist on a somewhat wider scale such as the ripple. Existence stretches from upstream—the past—to downstream, the future. Of course, the ripple grows weaker the farther you are from the center until it eventually disappears. But as I mentioned, the span of time—the ripple—is smaller the greater the energy. If it's a small amount of energy, the ripple is large. Therefore, they exist on a broader plane from the past to the future. My skill, *Time Machine*, uses that ripple's amplitude and makes the world think that the center of the energy—that the existence—is in the past."

The camera suddenly projected a hologram of a quiet river flowing downstream. A small ripple appeared in the center.

"That ripple is you," said Wells as she pointed. "The energy a single human possesses is vast, so the ripple is extremely narrow, as you can see. You would only be able to go a few seconds into the future or the past. If you wanted to return close to even an hour into the past, your energy would need to be much smaller. Let's take my earlier example. Since Δt and ΔE are constant, you would need to make the energy smaller if you wanted to increase the span of time."

Wells wagged her finger, causing the ripple in the river to grow until it was slowly undulating multiple times in size.

"I get that we need to decrease the amount of energy to go back a few dozen minutes in time," began Atsushi, "but how is that even possible?"

"Easy. You just have to quit being human," replied Wells in a frank manner.

"...Huh?"

"Instead of sending an entire human back into the past, we'll send but a small part. That way, you can go further into the past and prevent the weapon from being activated."

"Wait, a 'small part'...? What exactly do you mean?"

"It's simple, really." Wells pointed at her head. "We'll send your memory signals into the past."

Atsushi couldn't comprehend what she meant.

"My what...?"

"Human thought and emotion are nothing more than neurons firing in the brain. Memories root themselves in brain cells through these electrical signals. In other words, it's data. The energy of your memory signals is extremely weak on its own."

Wells swiped her finger once more, switching the projection image.

"The energy of a person weighing sixty kilograms is approximately 5.4 quintillion joules if using the mass-energy

conversion equation $E = mc^2$. This is far too large to send into the past. However, the energy of neural firings is nothing more than the electric potential of sodium traveling through a potential difference of a few dozen millivolts. While it cannot be unconditionally compared to a skill that manipulates time, it is like the difference in energy between the sun and a sneeze.”

While Atsushi didn’t quite get it, she didn’t appear to be lying. At the very least, he understood that the plan was to use her skill to send his memories into the past.

Wells suddenly turned her gaze to the ceiling.

“We’re almost out of time.”

When Atsushi looked up, he noticed gravel beginning to fall from the ceiling. The time inside the room was catching up with the outside world.

“When sending the signals from the brain’s memories into the past, I can only safely send them back thirty-three hundred seconds—exactly fifty-five minutes. That will be your second starting point.”

Atsushi suddenly realized the camera’s light was getting stronger. The once-dim room was now as bright as day.

“The reason I’m counting on you is because I cannot send myself back into the past. My skill only allows me to send someone once, and I’ve already sent myself back during the war.” Wells’s voice slowly faded as it was swallowed by the light. “I have been witness to a great number of incidents and accidents that I’ve used this skill of mine to avoid. In fact, I’ve been involved in so many accidents that people treat me like a terrorist now.”

The radiant light had become so powerful that Atsushi could no longer keep his eyes open. He covered his face with his hands and tried to avoid the blinding light, but no matter how tightly he shut his eyes or covered his face, he couldn’t block it out.

“I said I was going to send you back whether you liked it or not, but if possible, I’d like to hear how you feel. Do you wish to stop the weapon, save your people, and protect your friends?”

Even while Atsushi was drowning in the unbearable light, her words clearly reached his heart. But he had already made up his mind while listening to her explanation.

“Yes,” Atsushi firmly replied.

“Good.” Wells’s serious expression relaxed slightly. “One last thing. Do not tell *anyone* about the future that you know. Work alone as much as you can. One person greatly changing their actions could affect another’s. It’s a small island. It won’t be long before the enemy catches wind of what’s happening... Now, the time of detonation in our current present was twelve noon. But if your friends change their actions, then it’s highly likely the enemy could change their mind as

well, thus detonating the weapon even earlier.”

The light was getting so powerful that Atsushi could even feel it pushing against him. He opened his mouth to reply, but his voice was drowned out by the light. It wasn't long before he couldn't even stand under its pressure. That was when Atsushi realized it. This wasn't light. This was the power of the skill coming out of the camera and taking the form of light.

“I'm counting on you.”

Only Wells's cool voice clearly reached Atsushi for some reason. The control over time that had been protecting the room thereupon vanished. The time outside caught up with the room, and the scorching winds blew into the underground. The violent gusts, which were hundreds of degrees Fahrenheit, destroyed everything. All was swallowed by the crimson cyclone. Eventually, the Shell itself lowered upon the room, evaporating all that was left. Wells and even the camera melted into nothingness. A moment before, it looked as if a dark shadow fell from the sky, but there was no way to check. That was the last thing Atsushi saw. Everything disappeared out of sight. Even his consciousness ceased to exist...

“Atsushi, what are you doing standing on the bow?! If you fall overboard, we're leaving you behind!”

Atsushi's heart skipped a beat at the sudden voice. He felt as if his breathing, his heart, his blood—as if everything stopped. He couldn't talk. His head was blank, and he had no idea what was going on. He stood over the vast ocean. The high-speed ferry cut through the waves, splashing Atsushi with seawater.

“Ah...mn...”

Atsushi tried to speak, but his mouth did nothing more than open and close.

“Atsushi? This isn't the time to be spacing out. Do you seriously want to fall into the ocean that badly?”

He could hear Kunikida's voice, but he couldn't turn around.

“Kunikida...”

That was the only thing he could manage to get out of his trembling throat. The ocean was blue as far as the eye could see. The seagulls squawked in the sky above. There was nothing dangerous hanging over the sea. No Shell. No heat wave. Nothing.

“There is a zero percent chance of rainfall today. Southerly winds followed by southeasterly winds. The waves will range from three feet to five feet tall. In addition—”

“Kunikida,” said Atsushi after finally turning around, “what time is it?”

“What? It’s 11:05. Why?”

It was fifty-five minutes before noon.

“At any rate, I need you inside. This isn’t a vacation, I’ll have you know. We’re about to have a meeting regarding our latest job,” barked Kunikida while closing his notebook. Atsushi then unsteadily followed him inside.



After following Kunikida into the cabin, Atsushi saw that the other agents were already waiting inside. Tanizaki, Naomi, Yosano, Kenji—each one of them was killing time in their own way. Atsushi couldn’t process what was happening. Everything was in his field of vision, but information slipped over and around his brain, which refused to process anything. Atsushi was not in the cabin. He was inside memories he could *not* have experienced.

— *“Around four million people were killed.”*

— *“You will return to the past, find whoever is behind this, and steal the weapon.”*

“Attention, everyone! It’s time to start the meeting,” Kunikida announced loudly. However, not a single agent bothered to even look at him. Tanizaki was groaning, Yosano was absorbed in selecting her photos, Kenji was sleeping, and Naomi didn’t even acknowledge people who weren’t her brother.

Not even Atsushi was paying attention. If that wasn’t a dream, and if that really was going to happen...

There were fifty-five minutes until noon. Just fifty-five minutes.

“Atsushi. You there?”

Kunikida’s words suddenly brought Atsushi back to his senses.

“Oh... Sorry,” replied Atsushi in a fluster. “What were we talking about again?”

“Seriously?” Kunikida furrowed his brow. “Please focus. We are not on vacation.”

“Sorry,” apologized Atsushi in an almost inaudible voice. “Hey, Kunikida... Actually...”

— *“Do not tell anyone about the future that you know.”*

— *“But if your friends change their actions, then it’s highly likely the enemy could change their mind as well, thus detonating the weapon even earlier.”*

“I, uh...” Atsushi swallowed his words. “It’s nothing.”

“Sigh... This is going to be a long few days. Our job is to capture the thieves on the island this ferry is heading to. Our client will be

waiting for us there.”

“Okay.”

Atsushi nodded. Of course, he already knew that, and he already knew how it turned out.

“The reason why our client has asked us, private detectives, rather than the police is mainly because of how the island operates,” revealed Kunikida while flipping through his notebook. “The floating city of Standard Island was jointly designed by Germany, England, and France as a sailing island, and its territory is governed by all three nations. The island is entirely self-sufficient...”

Atsushi couldn't even process most of Kunikida's explanation, despite having heard it all before. While thinking, he listened to the information as he would listen to the sea roar from afar. Stopping the bomb from being detonated wouldn't be as easy as he had previously thought. He didn't know where the weapon even was, for starters. Wells said it was in the top secret zone, which meant he would need a gold coin to get inside. The problem was he didn't have one, so he wouldn't be able to get near the weapon. He'd become painfully aware of how difficult it was to get inside a gold-coin area “last time” when he was chasing the thieves. Atsushi wouldn't even get a chance to search for the weapon if he didn't do something about the fully armed guards and surveillance cameras first.

“Atsushi. Are you listening?”

Atsushi lacked information, but there were far too many things he had to check. Perhaps it wouldn't even be possible to look into everything in only fifty-five minutes. Was meeting up with Wells a possibility? But she was considered a terrorist, so she would surely be acting from the shadows. Plus, she said she couldn't send herself into the past. In other words, she wouldn't know that Atsushi came from the future even if they did meet. Trying to make contact with her would be a roundabout way of doing things—

“Atsushi, you there? So excited to sightsee that you can't stop thinking about it?”

Atsushi was startled by Kunikida's voice nearby.

“I need you focused. Did you hear what I said about the job? On that island—”

But before Kunikida could read from his notebook, Atsushi cut in:

“While a resort island, it was also jointly designed by Germany, England, and France, so its territory is governed by all three nations, right?”

Kunikida flinched upon hearing Atsushi practically recite verbatim the notes he was about to read.

“Y-yes. But in addition—”

“In addition, there are zones on the island that cannot be entered

without certain coins with embedded transmitters. Even tourists can go inside copper-coin zones, while silver-coin zones are for employees only, and gold-coin zones are secret areas that only a select few can enter.”

““Gold-coin zones?”” Kunikida’s hand froze in the middle of turning the page. “There isn’t anything in my notebook about that!”

“But it’s true.”

Kunikida stared at his notebook for a few moments, but before long, he groaned. “Well... Color me impressed. I can see you came prepared and are very enthusiastic about the job. Keep up the good work.”

“Yes, sir.”

Atsushi lifted his head and noticed the ferry was approaching the island. Perhaps calling the massive hunk of metal a floating machine would be more fitting. The flying bridge in the center of the island and the windmills were visible from the boat.

“We’re almost there,” Atsushi said to Kunikida. “...What’s wrong?”

Kunikida was slouching in his seat, drooping his head like an ear of rice. From the side, he looked burned-out, like lifeless ash.

“There was something...not written in my notebook...? That Atsushi knew *before* me...? My life is over... Just kill me...”

Kunikida moaned like a dying man, then flopped over in his seat.



After managing to get Kunikida’s lifeless body to stand, the group got off the boat. The moment they stepped foot onto the island, they were welcomed by old-fashioned architecture inspired by London. There were brick houses and cobblestone pavement, along with carriages coming and going. But the novelty had already worn off from Atsushi’s point of view.

Apparently back from the dead, Kunikida then mentioned, “Let me give everyone one of these before we go any farther.”

He took a few silver coins out of his pocket and handed one to everyone, including Atsushi. The silver coin dully shone in the sunlight.

Was there no way to get ahold of a gold coin? It didn’t matter if it meant even using a little force. Perhaps finding someone with a gold coin and stealing it would be the easiest way to get inside the secret zone.

Atsushi shook his head. That wouldn’t help him in the long run. He needed to do something about the soldiers and surveillance cameras inside if he wanted to search for the weapon. Therefore, his

best bet was to find someone with a gold coin and ask them to help—tell them a weapon was about to go off and destroy the island. But he had no idea who even had a gold coin. Even Dazai said he wasn't able to steal one. And if Atsushi actually did manage to convince someone to help, the future might possibly change depending on what they did. Plus, the situation would get even worse if the person he asked to help turned out to be the criminal.

If there wasn't this risk... If there weren't only fifty-five minutes... If Wells hadn't told him to work alone without asking for the help of his friends...

That moment, a covered carriage clattered over before stopping in front of Atsushi and the others.

"Sigh... The Armed Detective Agency, I presume?"

Atsushi jumped at the sound of the voice mixed with an exaggerated sigh.

Oh, right. How could I forget? I already knew I would run into him here.

It was a young man wearing blue work clothes. He seemed to be around thirty years old, but his mannerisms still made him appear far, far older. However, Atsushi saw something completely different.

The pistol in the surveillance footage...

The blood sprayed against the wall...

"I am the captain of...sigh...Standard Island. You can call me Captain Walston. I am the client who...sigh...arranged for you all to come. It is a pleasure to meet you."

"Ah, so you're the captain." Kunikida took a step forward. *"Thanks for coming to pick us up. By the way...you look extremely tired. Are you all right?"*

"Sigh... Thank you for your concern. However...sigh...this is how I normally am. Sigh... Please do not worry about it."

"At any rate, Captain Walston, could you give us the details of the mission now?"

All of a sudden, there was a dull electronic ring. Atsushi recognized it as the ringtone of the captain's phone, that of a ramen stall's shawm flute.

"Hello? Ah, yes! I am so terribly sorry! I'll find it! ...Yes, absolutely! I will make sure nobody is inconvenienced! You have my word!"

The captain hung up after profusely apologizing. Atsushi pondered a bit while observing the captain. He had never put much thought into it before, but why had the captain even been killed? A terrorist wearing a suit shot him. In other words, Wells killed him. But why? Her job was to find the weapon and retrieve it, not kill workers on the island.

Wells's lifeless eyes were visible in the surveillance footage. Atsushi immediately reached an answer: The captain was a suspect. She believed he was one of the people behind this. In fact, she must have thought, with absolute certainty, that he had the weapon. She must have thought she could prevent the death of millions by killing him.

But she was wrong. Shooting the captain didn't prevent the weapon from being detonated. He wasn't the one behind this. Wells couldn't send herself back into the past to search for the enemy. In other words, that was her first and only attempt, so it could be inferred she wasn't able to obtain detailed information on the enemy. But if one were to look at this from a different angle...

"Please come inside. This is actually the most popular hotel on the island with an extremely long waiting list. Anyway, please unwind from your journey..."

Right as the captain began walking them into the hotel, Atsushi quietly asked, "Captain, you wouldn't happen to have...*a gold coin* on you, would you?"

"Huh?!" The captain was taken aback. "Wh-where did you hear about that?!"

"Atsushi, are you coming or not?" asked Kunikida as he continued to head toward the hotel.

"Oh, sorry. Go on ahead without me! I'll be right there!" Atsushi yelled back. He was trying to keep Kunikida from hearing anything he didn't hear during the first timeline.

"So...where did you find out about the gold coin?" asked the captain while fidgeting.

"Oh, uh..." Atsushi used the excuse he came up with earlier. "Those of us with the detective agency did our research before getting here. We learned there was a secret zone on the island, and you needed a gold coin with a special transmitter to get in. Anyway, since you're the captain of the island, I figured you'd have one."

The captain had to have a gold coin. The reason Wells assumed he probably had the weapon was because he was at the very least in a position to have one. Not having a gold coin would dramatically separate him from the criminal profile Wells had come up with.

"Oh, uh... Yes. I do...have one. Yes."

The captain blundered out an answer. All of a sudden, Atsushi thought back to the captain's telephone call.

— *"I am so terribly sorry! I'll find it!"*

Last time, the captain's phone call didn't even register, but judging by how depressed the captain seemed...

"Captain, did you...happen to lose your gold coin, by chance?"

"Eek!" The captain jumped in surprise. "No, uh..." He looked at

Atsushi, then deeply sighed in resignation. “*Sigh...* Please don’t tell any of the other workers. It is an extremely valuable gold coin, and nobody was ever even supposed to know about it, but...I think someone stole it.”

“It was stolen?”

“I was always extra careful whenever I had it on me, but... *Sigh...* I’d be lucky if all I got was a demotion... Why did this happen to me...? I pray to the island’s guardian angel every day...”

“‘Guardian angel’?”

“There’s a legendary guardian they say has been watching over the people of the island since its inception. Legend has it that its power can freely change the shape of the island and has been protecting it from foreign enemies all these years. *Sigh...* I have a statue of the guardian decorated in my room alongside a cross that I pray to every day, so all I ask is to be helped out this one time...”

“I see...”

It seemed every place had their legends. But did it really make sense to have a local god on an island packed with cutting-edge technology? Besides, wouldn’t the *real* god get angry that he was praying to an island legend *and* the cross...? At any rate, it was now clear why the captain couldn’t stop sighing.

“That sounds rough.” Atsushi gave a sympathetic smile. “A gold coin is very valuable, so whoever stole it might sneak into the secret zone and—”

Atsushi paused, for he had suddenly realized this meant the enemy wasn’t necessarily someone who worked on the island. He’d originally thought that if the weapon was detonated in a gold-coin area, then the enemy had to be someone who had permission to enter. But if the captain’s gold coin was stolen and if said person had sneaked into the area where the weapon was being kept, then the list of potential suspects would increase exponentially.

“Do you know exactly when the gold coin was stolen from you?”

“*Sigh...* I had it with me this morning when I got dressed, so it was probably during one of my periodic reports...or when I was walking around the tourist zone... *Sigh...*”

After letting out a deep sigh with a downcast gaze, the captain lowered his head to Atsushi even more.

“Please let me know if you happen to find it. I beg of you.”



After hearing the details about the thieves they were supposed to catch—the second such explanation for Atsushi—the detective agency members headed inside the hotel the captain had arranged for them.

Atsushi went in his room, but he didn't take another step.

"Atsushi, what's wrong?" asked Kunikida. "Hurry up and unpack."

Atsushi looked at Kunikida, but he didn't know what to say. He knew what he was supposed to do: find and retrieve the weapon. But how was he supposed to do that?

"I'm...going to go take a walk outside."

"Hey, now. I get that you're excited that we're at a resort, but I need you to follow the schedule in my notebook. After unpacking our bags, we're going to have a meeting with the guards," explained Kunikida while looking at his notebook. "So do something about that giant suitcase of yours first."

Atsushi looked down at the luggage by his feet. The moment he heard he was coming to this island, he was so excited that he stuffed his bag with food and games, but now he just felt embarrassed.

"I don't need to unpack." Atsushi smiled. "I won't be using anything in there, after all."

"What?" Kunikida was puzzled.

"Sorry, but I'm in a hurry."

Atsushi began walking to the door.

"Atsushi," Kunikida called out from behind. "Did something happen to you?"

Atsushi instinctively stopped.

"You've been acting weird since we had the meeting on the boat." Kunikida narrowed his eyes.

"...Really?" Atsushi calmly asked. But he couldn't look back. Wells told him not to tell anyone about the future he experienced, but—

"Kunikida." Atsushi turned around. "Have you ever had a secret you couldn't tell anyone?"

"What?" A quizzical look washed over Kunikida's face. "Where did that come from?"

"Oh, uh..."

It was information he had to tell everyone, but it was also information that would put them in danger. This secret was tying Atsushi down.

"To tell the truth..."

Atsushi contemplated.

Should I tell him? Should I not? I don't know what to do. The moment I make a decision, millions of lives could either be saved or taken away. There's no way I can make such an important decision right now.

"It's nothing."

"H-hey! Atsushi!"

He ran out the door, ignoring Kunikida's calls.



Atsushi sprinted down the cobblestone walkway. Countless images flashed and disappeared before his eyes: the giant shell, the murdered captain, Wells firing a pistol, the light from the camera...

Atsushi was a member of the detective agency. He would be unfit for the job if he went and cried for help every time things became difficult. But even then...he might figure something out if he could find Wells. She was very knowledgeable about returning to the past, she had quite a bit of information on the island, and most importantly, there wasn't much time left until she killed the captain because of a misunderstanding. The captain was going to be a dead man at this rate. Atsushi ran around all over the place in search of Wells, but everywhere he went was a dead end. She left no sign she was ever there, and it soon became clear why she was known as an elusive terrorist. Atsushi's anxiety shot through the roof. Clinging to his last glimmer of hope, he headed over to the underground room in the woods. The iron doors were locked shut, so he broke the chain and peeked inside...but it was just an ordinary room. There was no Wells. There was no camera. There was only a cold darkness with an air of solitude.

Atsushi looked up at the clock tower and checked the time. It was 11:21. From what he could remember, it was 11:28 on the surveillance footage of the captain's murder. There were only seven minutes left. He couldn't tell anyone about what he learned *last time*, but if he didn't take action, the captain was going to die. Atsushi pulled out his phone without even thinking about it and dialed the captain's number.

"Yes...? Hello?" the captain said wearily.

"Captain, it's the detective agency. Where are you?"

"Right now? I'm heading to the engine depot zone to get my ID reissued. Why?"

What should I tell him? How can I make him stop? I can't think of anything.

"Could you wait a while before going?" Atsushi reflexively replied. "I can't tell you why, but it is extremely important that you do as I say."

"I apologize, but I am actually in a hurry," answered the captain apologetically. "Security is going to take over the gold-coin case for me, but...the old man in charge is a big pain in the—ahem—a very serious man, so if I am even one minute late, he's going to get angry and give me the silent treatment... Ah, I've never been more unhappy in my life. I feel like a lot of big things are happening to me every month lately. Sigh... Anyway, I will talk to you later."

"W-wait!" screamed Atsushi, stopping the captain before he could hang up. "This is really, really important! A person's life depends on

it!"

"I'll be more than willing to hear about it later; I have already arrived at the security room," answered the captain in a worn-out manner. *"When they reissue my gold coin, they are going to give me a new phone for security reasons, so I will have to call you back in ten or so minutes. Take care."*

"Wait...!"

But he hung up before Atsushi could say anything. Atsushi tried calling again but couldn't get through. After calling a few more times, he heard a beep and a recording telling him that the number he was dialing didn't exist. The phone number must have been deleted in the security room. There was no time. He wasn't going to be able to save the captain or the island at this rate.

He thought about going after the captain and heading to this so-called security room, but he didn't know where it was, and there was no guarantee he would be able to slow down the captain even if he went. Most of all...there was no direct correlation between saving the captain and preventing the weapon from being detonated. Atsushi would run out of time before he could find the weapon if he went to save the captain, which would defeat the entire purpose.

Atsushi wasn't completely out of options, but he didn't know which one was the right decision. There were dozens—hundreds—of things he could try, but only one or two of those would probably work. It would only take one wrong choice to lose everything.

"Maybe I should just go looking for this island's so-called guardian and...," he muttered to himself but almost immediately shook his head.

What is wrong with me? I can't waste precious time turning to some legendary creature that doesn't even exist. But then...what should I do?

"So this is where you've been."

Atsushi turned around at the sudden voice.

"Kunikida..."

"Having one or two agents randomly disappear doesn't surprise me anymore." Kunikida crossed his arms and walked over. "I'll tell you a secret. I'm actually a detective. That's why I immediately know when one of my men is acting strange... You know something, don't you?"

Kunikida pressed him hard for an answer, but Atsushi couldn't say a word.

"I knew it," claimed Kunikida while scratching his head. *"Sigh... I felt there was something else going on here, but I can't believe you were the first one to figure it out. I know you aren't keeping silent without good reason, but your face is telling me you're in trouble."*

The words tried to crawl out of Atsushi's throat, pressuring him to

give in.

“Is it something you can’t tell anyone?”

Atsushi slightly nodded.

“And you can’t tell anyone why you can’t, either?”

He faintly nodded once more, then whispered in a feeble voice, “What should I do?”

“Isn’t it obvious?” replied Kunikida without missing a beat. “Talk to *him*.”

“‘Him’...?”

“Yes, him. The man you’re thinking about right now,” continued Kunikida as if the answer were right in front of his face. “Preface it with how you can’t tell him what you’re about to tell him and ask for his help. I’m sure he’s somewhere on this island. He’s a repellent man. The worst of the worst. But if lives are at risk and you tell him you really need his help...” Kunikida paused, then deeply sighed as if he didn’t want to say it. “Just leave it to him, and everything will be okay.”

Atsushi nodded. He didn’t ask Kunikida to clarify because it was clear who he meant.

“Kunikida.” Atsushi’s voice was full of grim determination. “Could I ask you to come with me and not ask any questions?”



Atsushi and Kunikida ended up going to the storage zone. Each step Atsushi made was filled with resolve as he headed straight toward the place in his memories. While walking through the zone with brick storehouses on each side, a group of workers frantically came running over.

“Hey, did you see a tall guy with black hair around here?”

“Hmm?” Kunikida curiously tilted his head.

Atsushi, however, pointed at the path they’d come from without even hesitating for a second. “I saw him running west.”

“Really? Thanks!”

The workers shared information while rushing in the direction Atsushi pointed to.

“What was that all about?” Kunikida stared at the workers from behind. “Did you actually see a tall man with black hair?”

“I’m about to.”

Atsushi walked straight across the stone path, then suddenly started to tiptoe.

“Uh...? What are you...?”

Atsushi placed a finger on his lips, signaling Kunikida to keep his voice down. After that, he silently approached a gray garbage can at

the street corner before suddenly removing the lid.

“Boo!”

“Eep!”

Atsushi shouted, causing the garbage can to fly into the air along with the person inside.

“Dazai?!” Kunikida was dumbfounded. “What the hell are you doing here?”

After landing on his side in the garbage, Dazai simply blinked.

“I’m really sorry, Dazai.” Atsushi lowered his head into a bow. “I know I shouldn’t have done it, but I’m probably never going to get another chance, so I just couldn’t help myself.”

“...”

Dazai’s eyes were wide-open in astonishment.

“Are you mad...?” Atsushi timidly asked. “Um... I’m really sorry! I, like— I just acted on impulse, and...”

Dazai still didn’t say a word. He wasn’t moving, either. In fact, he didn’t even seem to be breathing.

“D-Dazai...? Dazai?”

Atsushi rushed over to Dazai and tried to help him up, but the moment he touched him, he leaped back in disbelief.

“H-he’s ice-cold!” Atsushi trembled. “He doesn’t have a pulse! He’s dead!”

His face pale, Atsushi looked back at Kunikida when all of a sudden...

“Boo!”

“Ahhh!”

Being scared so close up caused Atsushi to stumble back and roll over on the ground.

“Ha-ha-ha! I never thought you’d be able to scare me like that! You’ve grown, Atsushi! The only way I knew how to reward you was by showing you my secret technique: Cardiac Arrest. It must be an honor.”

“So you’ve finally given up being human,” muttered Kunikida. He sounded thoroughly disgusted. “How does somebody survive even after stopping their own heart?”

“I learned how to do it during my quest to master the secret arts of suicide, naturally. Hearts don’t take long to start back up; it’s no big deal.”

“Nothing you say ever makes sense.”

While lying on the pavement and listening to their conversation, Atsushi gazed up at the sky.

I’ll never in a million years be a match for him, thought Atsushi.

But strangely, it was almost as if that thought cleared the fog before his eyes.

“Dazai,” said Atsushi, still lying on the ground, “there’s something I need to tell you.”

There was no more hesitation in his voice.

I was afraid to make a choice because my decision could end up killing millions. But I won’t hesitate any longer. If I have to make a choice to move forward, then this is what I choose.

“Then let’s hear it.” Dazai shrugged his shoulders gleefully. “But before you say another word, there’s something I noticed.”

Dazai took to his feet and looked down at Atsushi. His brown overcoat fluttered in the light ocean breeze. He then said:

“You’re the *Foreseer*—the man who can see into the future, aren’t you?”

Atsushi closed his eyes and smiled.

Yep, I was right—there’s just no beating this guy.



Atsushi told Dazai and Kunikida everything: what happened with the thieves, the death of the captain, being held captive and running away, the encounter with Wells, the detonation of the weapon. He didn’t know what would help. He just tried to be as detailed as possible about what he remembered, including the people he talked with and the actions they took. Dazai and Kunikida listened silently until the very end. After finishing his story, Atsushi let out a deep breath. Kunikida then said, “If that’s true, then we are facing an unprecedented crisis.”

There were even more wrinkles between Kunikida’s eyebrows than usual.

“But can we truly say for certain that this isn’t something Atsushi dreamed up or some skill that made him hallucinate?”

“I doubt it,” Dazai immediately cut in. “Because Atsushi knew things about the weapon that only I was supposed to know.”

“But then...what should we do?” asked Kunikida. “That Wells person said, ‘If your friends change their actions, then it’s highly likely the enemy could change their mind as well, thus detonating the weapon even earlier’ than noon. She has a point. If we make a scene, then the enemy may very well decide to detonate the weapon immediately.”

“They would. I’m sure of it,” Dazai agreed. “You don’t need to put that much thought into it. This is a suicide mission. The person behind this intends to die along with the other four million victims. To the terrorist, noon probably just sounded like a good time to deliver the final judgment, so moving up the plan would be only logical if necessary.”

“And furthermore, we don’t even know who this person is or where the weapon is.”

Watching Kunikida and Dazai at a loss made Atsushi a little worried. Were the conditions too grueling this time? Would even Dazai have to call it quits?

“Hey, Dazai...? So...do you have a plan?”

Having heard his name, Dazai looked up.

“Did you really think I *wouldn’t*?”

After Dazai stared off into the distance with a cool gaze, he gave a slight smirk and admitted:

“We already have the advantage of knowing the future. To me, this job is easier than pie. It doesn’t matter if we don’t know who’s behind this or if there’s a time limit. We have so many leads that we can go off of.”

After Dazai began walking west, Atsushi hurried after him until Dazai suddenly came to a stop and turned his gaze at the townscape.

“Well, as long as there aren’t any new uncertainties popping up anywhere that Atsushi doesn’t even know about, that is.”



Meanwhile, two tourists arrived at the floating city Standard Island’s port: a young woman with honey-blond hair and a man in a black overcoat. It was Higuchi and Akutagawa from the Port Mafia.

“It looks like we were able to make it on the island,” stated the young woman.

“...” Akutagawa didn’t say a word as he stood in the ocean breeze.

“Akutagawa?” Higuchi turned around and looked at him.

“Higuchi,” he suddenly said while staring into the distance. “Give me the details.”

“Our targets are people who betrayed the syndicate. Yesterday, they broke into a bank branch under the Port Mafia’s patronage, picked the locks of a few safety deposit boxes, and tried to steal all the money and valuables in—”

“Do they look like businessmen in white collared shirts?”

“Hmm?” Higuchi hesitated, taken aback by the sudden question.

“Um... According to the information the ferry’s crew gave me on the way here, yes, that does seem to match their description.”

“I see.”

Akutagawa didn’t say another word after that. He neither walked nor stirred. He simply continued to stare into space. Like an ominous stone statue, he continued to ponder. Ten seconds. Twenty seconds. Akutagawa still didn’t move. After thirty seconds went by, Higuchi apprehensively asked, “Um... Akutagawa, sir? Is something the

matter?"

"Change of plans. Forget about the traitors," instructed Akutagawa as he suddenly started to walk.

"What?!" Higuchi rushed after him. "But, sir, the boss ordered—"

"Do not make me repeat myself."

As Akutagawa looked straight ahead like a hound staring down its prey, Higuchi instinctively swallowed any doubts she had. Akutagawa turned his piercing gaze to the townscape in the distance. He saw the facilities, the machinations lurking within the darkness, and into the hellfire of his memories—the colossal, fiery sphere that enveloped the island and scorched the ocean.

Akutagawa dropped to his knees. The heat wave around him had already exceeded several hundred degrees Fahrenheit. He tore through space, creating multiple barriers to block the incoming heat. Nevertheless, it took no more than a puff of heat to slip through a small opening between his shields to instantly scorch his flesh and rob his throat and eyeballs of all moisture. He couldn't even speak anymore. Surrendering his body to the flames, leaving nothing behind but ash—to Akutagawa, it was a rather beautiful ending for someone who had lived their life neck-deep in death and murder. He smiled with self-mockery.

Blistering hot air filled his lungs through his smirk, sending him into a violent fit of coughs. But at the very same time, he saw something out of the corner of his eye. There was an opened iron door leading underground. The chain used to hold the sturdy door shut was snapped in two, and the lock was ripped apart by some sort of unusual power. What caught Akutagawa's eye was a light escaping the underground. It was a pale, inorganic light. There was something bizarre about it, as if it were ignoring spatial distance to reach here.

Was the light coming from underground? A small ripple expanded inside Akutagawa as he quietly accepted his fate. The island's electrical equipment should all be destroyed by now. That light must be caused by some sort of skill. It would be hard to imagine that the light source had nothing to do with the destruction occurring aboveground. If the person who caused all this was down there...

Akutagawa slightly curled his lip.

Perhaps dying wouldn't be so bad after slicing their head off.

He placed a hand on his knee and pushed himself up to his feet. The ground was shaking, the virulent winds were ravaging the landscape; there was perhaps no one left around, much less any buildings. The burning shell was getting so close that he couldn't even directly look at it anymore. Akutagawa violently coughed, dousing the

ground with his dark-red blood, which immediately evaporated. But even then, his lips were curled into an ominous smile.

Only ten more yards. The shaking ground made him stagger and trip. Five more yards. What appeared to be black rain was nothing more than melted iron framework from a building. Akutagawa silently created a barrier and protected himself from the droplets.

Two more yards. The soles of his shoes had finally started to melt. He continued to walk, fighting against the high temperatures hot enough to burn his feet to the bone.

The last yard. A wall of fire stood before him. The tears he created in space were nothing more than paper shields before this heat. The crimson barrier was like the grim reaper broadly smiling at him, and Akutagawa returned the smile to the familiar face.

With no strength left to jump in, Akutagawa collapsed into the entranceway of the underground lair as the sphere of fire in the sky immediately melted the hole behind him.

Akutagawa's almost completely charred body fell into the light. His clouded eyes made it impossible for him to clearly see the room he was falling into, but even then, there were two things he did notice: the machine in the center of the light and two shadows. The machine grew even brighter. Akutagawa slightly squinted in its direction as he fell.

Was that...a camera?

Someone in the room spoke, but the deafening explosions outside had already robbed Akutagawa of his hearing. Nevertheless, he did recognize one of the shadowy figures. His light-colored hair, his timid mannerisms—it was the new detective at the Armed Detective Agency, a boy even younger than Akutagawa.

Man-Tiger...!

Akutagawa suddenly remembered what the traitor had said before he executed him.

—“*The carrier said the weapon was inside a black briefcase, and it was made of an antique camera and a detonator and stuff like that...*”

The dots slowly connected in Akutagawa's head: an antique camera, a strange light, a room mysteriously protected from destruction, and the man-tiger calmly standing in the room.

So that's what's going on.

So this is how it's going to be, Man-Tiger!

But Akutagawa's scorched throat could not scream, and the man-tiger was facing the other way—Atsushi never even saw him. The crimson storm and pale light simultaneously reached their climax, destroying the room, and thus—

“Akutagawa...? Akutagawa, sir?”

The voice calling Akutagawa dragged his consciousness out of his memories.

“Is everything okay? We could rest at the hotel if you aren’t feeling—”

“Higuchi,” said Akutagawa, cutting her off, “give me the time.”

“O-okay.” She hastily checked her watch. “It’s 11:05. Why do you ask?”

“Noon,” suddenly replied Akutagawa. “It was exactly noon. I can clearly remember the clock’s hands.”

“Um... Akutagawa, sir?”

Higuchi glanced at her superior with a look of concern as if she was trying to figure out what he was talking about.

“There’s not even an hour left,” Akutagawa said while surveying the island. “Using a weapon of mass destruction to destroy Yokohama... How refined of you, Man-Tiger.”

He began to walk forward with firm determination in his step.

“But thanks to that, I finally have a reason to cut your head off. Having a detestable time limit simply makes it even more exciting. I long for the day that I cut into your flesh, bones, and entrails and bathe in your blood.”

Higuchi gasped as she stared at his profile—a heartless smile, like a blood-hungry wolf staring at its prey.

“Higuchi, the man-tiger is somewhere on this island.”

“‘Man-tiger’? ...Do you mean *that* man-tiger?”

“We will find where he is and take his head before the hour is over. Break into the island’s immigration office and get me that information.”

“T-take his head...? But why exactly are we aborting our original mission to search for the man-tiger...?”

“Why? The answer is simple.”

Akutagawa turned around and fixed Higuchi with a fiendish gaze.

“Because I said so. Is that not enough?”

Higuchi stood straight up the instant she saw those eyes.

“I will begin the search for the man-tiger immediately.”

Akutagawa gazed at the vast, never-ending blue summer sky.

“Just you wait, Man-Tiger. I’ll make you rue what you’ve done as I pull out your entrails and slice through your flesh. The flames of hell will not be burning this island but incinerating your innards.”



11:27.

Atsushi looked up at the clock and muttered the time to himself.

Only thirty-three minutes left until the weapon was expected to be detonated. Atsushi was briskly walking down the wide cobbled pavement on the German side of the island as tourists and wagons passed through. He couldn't let even one second go to waste. Four million people's lives depended on his actions. Although he was acting under Dazai's instructions, Atsushi was the heart of the plan and was especially necessary for what was about to come, since he had seen what happened *last time* firsthand. He wiped the cold sweat off his chin with his hand.

"Dazai, can you hear me?" Atsushi spoke into the wireless microphone under his shirt's collar.

"Loud and clear." He heard Dazai's cheerful voice coming from his earpiece. *"How does it feel to be able to listen to my beautiful voice as if I were whispering into your ear? You're so lucky. Oh, I know. How about I sing a song?"*

"Just do your job!" Judging by Kunikida's roaring voice, it sounded as though he was standing behind Dazai.

"Don't be so serious. What's the worst that could happen? If we fail, we die. Big deal."

"Don't drag your sick fetishes into this. Atsushi, we should be able to do something about the captain. I'll make sure he isn't killed. You just focus on the mission. Can you see the target?"

Atsushi looked up ahead and replied, "Yes, I found them almost immediately. They're in the same place as last time."

There they were, squatting in the back of an alley facing the art museum:

The *key components* to the plan.

"Boss, weren't you the one who told us it wasn't hard? I recall you saying, 'All you've got to do is commit twelve measly numbers to memory! I can still remember the names of every woman I've slept with.'"

"Yeah, I said it. So what?"

Atsushi could hear his proud, unapologetic voice from here.

"I'm the boss of this band of thieves, so it's your job to back me up! If the boss forgets the twelve-digit lock code, then you need to roll

up your sleeves and get to work!"

"Boss, you're amazing! You're the man! I got your back no matter what happens!"

After seeing them again from a distance, I really don't think they're cut out for a life of crime. They're talking loudly in public about their plans, they don't care that a major part of their scheme failed, and they don't seem to have much direction. The boss seems more in love with the idea of stealing rather than what they're trying to steal. There's a kind of beauty in that line of thinking, but...it doesn't really amount to much when you're thrown in jail ninety percent of the time.

Nevertheless, these three were nothing more than divine aid this time around.

"Hey, thieves. Lookin' for a twelve-digit lock code?"

Somebody suddenly struck up conversation with the trio. It was Atsushi.

"Hmm? Who are you?" The boss swiftly turned around and glared.

"Who the hell d'you think you are, cotton swab?! What do you want with my boss?!" The teenage boy rolled up his sleeves, ready to start a fight.

"Heh-heh-heh... Who I am is of little importance," replied Atsushi as he desperately tried to put on a villainous facade. "What's important is what we can share. Isn't that right, Boss?"

I've never been this embarrassed in my life. What am I even saying?

Telling himself that this was all part of the plan, Atsushi continued acting just how Dazai instructed him to, despite the fact that he felt as if he was going to pull a face muscle.

"I am but a humble thief by trade, but some call me Matasaburo of the Wind, since I am like the wind when I steal."

Atsushi couldn't stop sweating. Matasaburo was apparently the name of a traveler who'd stayed in Kenji's village for a short while, but was there really nobody better to choose from? Did Dazai simply tell Atsushi to do this because he thought it would be funny? No, that wouldn't make sense. Dazai would never play games when people's lives depended on the mission at hand.

"Hmm... I totally made that character up just for kicks, but you're actually doing a really good job, Atsushi."

Just for kicks...

Regardless, four million people's lives depended on this. There was no backing down now.

"Heh-heh-heh... If you want to know the twelve-digit lock code, then I'm your guy. But in return...let me in on your plans."

"What?" The boss raised an eyebrow.

"Boss—or should I say, Great Phantom Thief Nemo, I know about your special power. You're a pretty big name in the business we're in,

after all—an elite thief with the power to walk through walls. All I ask is that you use your powers to help me out a little bit. There’s something I want to steal that’s being kept in the innermost area of the island.”

This was Dazai’s plan. This was how they would get into the secret zone without a gold coin. Wells said that the weapon was on the lowest floor of the top secret zone in the innermost section of the island. In other words, it was in a gold-coin area, but even if they got their hands on one, there was still the issue of surveillance cameras. This was the scheme Dazai came up with: becoming one of the thieves. Atsushi would be able to go to any gold-coin area without a gold coin by using the ability of the thieves’ boss to walk through walls.

“Heh-heh-heh. So what do you say? Not that I care either way.”

Dazai’s plan was perfect. I just wish it didn’t have to be this embarrassing.

“Who d’you think you’re talkin’ to?!” threatened the enraged teenager. “Ya really think we’d trust some stranger who just randomly popped up outta nowhere?!”

“Hmm... I regretfully have to agree with Gab,” chimed in the middle-aged man with his arms crossed. “This is just far too suspicious. He could be trying to steal something from us, for all we know.”

“Hey.”

The boss took a firm step forward and towered over Atsushi, blocking out the sunlight with his massive frame. Atsushi was naturally petrified by the giant’s sudden gaze, but he couldn’t let himself cower.

“...Yes, Boss?”

“It was clear you were the real thing the moment you referred to me as the Great Phantom Thief. I like your style, which is why I would be thrilled to have you on board. However...” The boss glared at Atsushi. “Before I can do that, you need to answer me this. Out of all the thieves who have ever lived, who do you look up to the most?”

Atsushi’s mind went blank for a moment as he tried to figure out what the boss was getting at, but he almost immediately reached an answer. It was simple: Arsène Lupin. Even Atsushi was familiar with the name, and he remembered from *last time* that the boss essentially worshipped Lupin.

“Well, of course, the Phantom Thief Arsè—”

“Atsushi, say *Goemon Ishikawa*,” Dazai immediately advised from the other end of the earpiece. Atsushi suddenly froze, his mouth wide-open. The boss stared at him.

“What?”

“Uh...”

Atsushi opened and closed his mouth a few times. Then, after a few moments went by, he stated, “Goemon Ishikawa.”

“Wonderful!”

The boss violently clapped Atsushi on the shoulder with his massive hand, which made him even more confused.

“I was planning on snapping you in two and throwing you in the ocean if you had said Arsène Lupin! We don’t need *two* thieves trying to succeed Lupin as the next legendary phantom thief, after all. Anyway, you’re in! By the way, who’s Goemon Ishikawa?”

Atsushi quietly breathed a sigh of relief.

“Please tell me you’re joking, Boss,” said the middle-aged man with a sigh. “Every time you randomly decide to do something, I’m always the one who has to keep you in check. Put yourself in my shoes for once, please.”

“Hmph. Boss says you’re in, so you’re in, but I’m still his number one disciple. You better respect me. Got it?” proudly stated the young man as he leaned back.

Atsushi looked at the thieves once more. The large man they called Boss was the leader of the group, standing over six feet tall with armor-like muscles and a shiny, shaved head. He went by the alias Nemo in the underground world, and he possessed the skill to walk through walls up to two inches thick.

The next thief was a weary-looking middle-aged man in a suit named Virgo. He always looked troubled. He’d mentioned *last time* that he was an engineer and his job was to disable security cameras and extract passwords. Atsushi felt a connection with him, seeing as how he was always being forced into tough positions thanks to the boss’s reckless behavior.

The youngest in the group was Gab, a poorly dressed teenager who had the utmost respect for his boss and always fed his ego. He kept a dagger in his pocket as well. Unfortunately, he was utterly spineless and never proved to be good for anything other than buttering up his boss from Atsushi’s point of view.

Then...there was the fourth thief, Matasaburo of the Wind. In other words, Atsushi himself.

“Let’s do this, Matasaburo! You’ve got nothin’ to worry about now that you’re one of us. I dunno what you’re looking for, but I’ll swing by wherever it is and grab it for you on the way. After all, they don’t call me the Great Phantom Thief for nothing!”

“Wait, wait, wait! Boss, we need to enter the lock code before we do that,” chimed in Virgo, flustered. “That way, we’ll know if he’s really trustworthy.”

Everyone looked at Atsushi. A cold sweat dripped down his nape.

“Heh-heh-heh...” Atsushi laughed just for the heck of it.

The engineer Virgo opened the electronic control panel on the wall outside the art museum and pulled out a wire from inside. He then took the tip of the wire, plugged it into his cell phone, and opened an algorithm he had prepared in advance.

“All that’s left is to input the twelve-digit lock code,” said Virgo while looking at his cell phone. “So what’s the password, new guy?”

Atsushi scratched his ear while waiting. It wasn’t long before the information came in.

“We got it, Atsushi. It’s 148920577297.”

“148920577297.”

Atsushi repeated the numbers just as he was told.

“This should cut off the firewall, allowing us to freely alter the video. *Should* being the operative word here,” added Virgo as he looked at his cell phone after punching in the numbers Atsushi gave him. “It worked, Boss. It looks like he was telling the truth. Now we can steal without the surveillance cameras catching us.”

Atsushi let out a sigh of relief, albeit softly so nobody could hear. The twelve-digit lock code was essential in order to get the band of thieves inside, but it wasn’t easy information to come by; Atsushi couldn’t just ask someone on the island and get a straight answer. That was where the detective agency came in. They always found a way. This time around, they received some outside help from a hacker and old friend of Kunikida’s named Katai Tayama, who possessed the skill to control electronics. While he rarely left the house—or even his bed, for that matter—his sheer genius was how he could uncover highly classified information like the surveillance cameras’ lock code in such a short period of time.

“We’re about to move out. I think it’s time we kindly ask the captain about this island’s secrets.”

There was a mirthful note in Dazai’s voice. What was he scheming?

“What’s with the long face, Matasaburo?!” yelled the boss. “There’s no time to waste! The world’s treasures are waiting for us! Now, come! It’s time to steal!”



Atsushi was walking down the same path he’d used to chase the thieves last time. The four of them were heading to the art museum’s basement. They traveled through the sterile white hallway before stopping in front of a familiar automatic door. Right to the side of the door was an authentication panel used for security. The door would, in theory, open if they were to hold a gold coin over the panel.

Waiting for them behind the door was a gold-coin area.

"This door oughta be less than two inches thick, Boss," claimed Atsushi while tapping on the door.

"Guess there's only one way to find out."

The boss opened his large hand and placed it on the automatic door. His hand then sank into it while radiating a faint light until he was wrist-deep inside as if the door didn't even exist.

"All right, we're good. Matasaburo, hold my hand."

"Huh?" Atsushi instinctively squeaked.

"Whaddaya mean, 'huh'? You know about my skill. Hurry up."

After seeing the boss wave him over, Atsushi suddenly remembered that the boss's skill allowed not only him but anyone he touched to go through walls. In other words, all four of them needed to hold hands to go through the wall.

"Hurry up, new guy. What, got a problem with holdin' the boss's hand or somethin'?" Gab urged him on.

Atsushi thereupon took the boss's hand with grim determination. The boss smirked. Atsushi then took Gab's hand on his other side, while Gab took Virgo's in his. Hand in hand, the three of them leaped through the door as if they were jumping into water. The feeling of walking through walls was a lot subtler than Atsushi had imagined. It was like walking through a thin piece of film and was over in the blink of an eye. He unconsciously had his eyes closed.

And just like that, Atsushi was finally able to sneak into a gold-coin area—and so easily, since it had the reputation of essentially being a military facility.

He was finally here, but the problem was what came next. He had to go to the fifth basement floor where the briefcase—where Annihilation—was.

"Atsushi, can you hear me?" asked Dazai in a cheerful voice. *"We just had a pleasant conversation with the captain, and he apparently doesn't know a thing about the briefcase. Fortunately, though, he was kind enough to tell us about the secret zone's layout and guards."*

"He was kind enough to tell us?" Atsushi wondered.

He had thought about that as well: Perhaps the captain could give them some secret information on the zone. However, they would need to somehow convince him to help, since he would be violating the law of the island, so they needed information worthy of gaining his trust and time to persuade him. Surely he wouldn't even believe them if they asked him to break the rules because Yokohama was going to be vaporized.

"Did you tell him the island was going to be destroyed?" asked Atsushi.

"Well, we did, but he didn't believe us. That's why we had to give him

a little more incentive to be cooperative."

What kind of incentive...?



Inside a hotel room, Dazai and Kunikida stood before the wireless transceiver while talking to Atsushi.

"Well, we did, but he didn't believe us. That's why we had to give him a little more incentive to be cooperative," Dazai cheerfully replied.

In the center of the room behind him was a chair—and sitting in it was the poor captain with his arms and legs tightly bound together.

"What exactly...did you do to him?" Atsushi's curious voice asked over the transceiver.

"Surprisingly enough, our captain here just loves pudding, so we gave him some to put him in a good mood."

The captain tied to the chair tearfully cried, "Pudding?! Please...! No more pudding! I'll do anything you want me to! So please... Please get that pudding away from meeeeeee!"

"You're a demon in human skin. You know that?" expressed Kunikida in utter disgust as he stood by Dazai's side.

"Hey, uh...? What did you do to him...?" Atsushi sounded tense.

"Ha-ha! It's a secret. More importantly, the armory on the fifth basement floor seems to be our best bet so far. Records apparently show that something was brought there not too long ago," reported Dazai in an amused manner. "The jeweled truffles the thieves are after are in the vault on the fourth basement floor. When you reach that floor, go straight to the fifth basement floor while they head to the vault."

"Roger."

"Good luck, Atsushi," said Dazai before hanging up. He then turned around and faced the captain once more. His eyes were smiling.

"W-wait! Please, no more pudding! Anything but that!" The captain screamed like a little girl while trembling in the chair he was tied to, rocking it with him.

"Don't worry, Captain. Everything's gonna be okay. But could you do me a favor in return?" Dazai's smile deepened even further. "Heh-heh... It's not like you have a choice, though. You know what'll happen if you say no, right?"

The captain trembled with fear, and a piercing cry echoed throughout the hotel room.



Atsushi swiftly started to run with hushed footsteps until he silently made it to the corner of the hallway. After peeking his head out and making sure there were no guards, he immediately gave the signal to the others behind him.

“Heh. You may be young, but you’re silent and quick, too. You’ll make a fine thief one day, Matasaburo.”

The boss came strolling up as he spoke in a loud, confident voice as if he didn’t even care if anyone heard. They were in the top secret zone, but everything about the hallway didn’t seem all that different from the silver-coin area they came from. The floor and walls were white, and there were far fewer guards on patrol and armed soldiers than Atsushi had predicted. He was expecting the colonel leading countless fully equipped soldiers to be blocking their way just like *last time*, so it was a little anticlimactic. Perhaps it was such a secretive, important area that they wouldn’t even allow that many guards inside. Instead, there were security cameras placed all over the ceiling as if to cover any blind spots. Nevertheless, all the cameras were showing now was the same footage of an empty hallway on repeat.

The gold-coin area extended from the second basement floor to the fourth basement floor. The captain apparently had given them a brief explanation of the layout (thanks to Dazai’s incentive). Regardless, Atsushi had to find a way downstairs. That was his first hurdle. After he’d led the group down the hallway for a short while, something suddenly caught Atsushi’s eye.

“Dazai, I found an elevator,” Atsushi whispered into the microphone. “There’s a staircase next to it, too.”

“You should probably stay away from the elevator,” cautioned Dazai. “The surveillance camera in there is part of the silver-coin area, which means it’s still working properly. I know it’s not ideal, but you need to use the stairs.”

“Roger.”

“What’re you mumbling about?” asked Gab, who was suddenly standing right behind him. Atsushi jumped.

“N-nothing! Nothing at all!”

“Hmph. There’s somethin’ strange about you.” Gab glared at Atsushi. “No offense, but you don’t look like a thief to me, Matasaburo. I’ve been stealing just to survive my entire life, and you don’t smell like one of us.”

“There’s a smell?”

“The smell of desperation. The smell that says you would do anything to survive.”

Atsushi inwardly disagreed.

You're wrong. I'm just as desperate as you are to survive—maybe even more so, actually. My body's covered in scars—remnants of my past. The only reason why I don't give off that scent anymore is because they helped rid me of it.

"Gab, was it?" said Atsushi. "Do you want to be a great thief like the boss, too?"

"I don't care about that," Gab frankly replied. "I don't care what the job is. I just want to work with someone amazing like the boss... Wait. I don't remember telling you my name."

Oh, right... Oops.

Atsushi tried to laugh it off, but all of a sudden, he heard a noise. Somebody was coming up the stairs. Thanks to his tiger skills, which improved his sense of hearing, he was able to make out the sound of footsteps. There was one—no, two pairs of footsteps. Judging by their heavy steps, they probably belonged to two soldiers wearing military boots. Atsushi suddenly had flashbacks of the armed soldiers with their massive submachine guns and bulletproof vests. He would be able to escape, but the other three were sitting ducks.

What should I do?

"Gab! Two soldiers are heading this way," Atsushi quickly whispered. "Go tell the boss and Virgo. Now."

"S-s-soldiers?! S-s-s-seriously?!" Gab suddenly began to panic. "O-okay, relax, Gab! It's gonna be okay," he reassured himself. "It's exactly times like this where I just need to take some deep breaths and count my fingers! One, two, three... Huh? I'm only counting nine!"

"Gab, calm down!!" Atsushi shook his shoulders. "This hallway is a straight path; there's nowhere to hide. You need to tell the boss what I told you and find a wall you guys can go into. Now, go!"

"B-but what about you?!"

"I..." Sweat dripped down Atsushi's temple. "I'll take care of the soldiers!"

"H-hey?!" Gab screamed in the background as Atsushi rushed toward the footsteps.

The staircase before him was U-shaped with a half-space landing in the middle. It went stairs, landing, right-angle turn to the next staircase, another landing, and another right-angle turn to the next staircase. The soldiers were approaching the second flight of stairs, and Atsushi could see their heads from where he was standing. He jumped.

"Hey, did you hear that?"

"Hmm? Hear what?"

The soldiers looked at the staircase, dumbfounded. They couldn't see Atsushi, but he could see them—the *crowns of their heads*, to be exact, for Atsushi was hanging from the ceiling right above them with

his claws. He'd dug all of his claws into the ceiling to support his weight. He had kicked off the wall on the floor above them and grabbed on to the ceiling in an upside-down position. The soldiers had trained to fight against other people, so they didn't have a habit of looking straight up.

"It was probably just my imagination, but go check if there are any intruders up ahead. I'll back you up from down here."

"Roger."

As Atsushi clung to the ceiling, a drop of sweat ran down his cheek. He never exercised this much caution against criminals and thugs in Yokohama, but these were professional soldiers. They swiftly held out their guns, ready to fire at anything that showed up before them. One of the soldiers ran up the staircase. Even with Atsushi's skill, he wouldn't survive unscathed if he attacked them head-on.

Atsushi let go of the ceiling and dropped down toward the soldier's head. While he was falling, he wrapped his legs around the soldier's arms while sliding his arm around the soldier's neck. Atsushi's legs prevented the soldier from using his gun as he put him in a rear naked choke.

Applying enough pressure in this move stimulated something known as the carotid sinus reflex, which created a sudden decrease in blood sent to the brain via the carotid arteries, thus depriving the brain of oxygen and making the opponent lose consciousness within seconds. The only way to swiftly take out a soldier with a protective mask and bulletproof armor on was to go after the one part of his body not protected: the neck. The soldier was unable to even yell as the tiger arm powerfully squeezed his neck, nor could he fight back because of the tiger legs around his arms. He passed out just before he could react. Hearing his partner collapse, the soldier up ahead instantly turned around.

"What the...?!"

He immediately pointed his gun at Atsushi, but Atsushi leaped forward like a speeding bullet, closing the distance between them in the blink of an eye. He then slapped the soldier's gun before he could even fire, sending the weapon flying into the air as if it had been hit with a giant hammer. The soldier's finger released the trigger. All Atsushi had left to do was take his opponent's back again and put him in a choke hold. Only when he saw a glittering silver light did he realize how naive his strategy was. The soldier immediately took out a gun he had strapped to his waist. His sidearm was a 9mm pistol. Atsushi could clearly see the muzzle pointing at him out of the corner of his eye, but his body was still midmotion from his first attack, leaving him with no way to dodge.

He's gonna hit me. I shouldn't have underestimated a seasoned soldier,

thought Atsushi as the muzzle pointed right at him.

“Hi-yaaaaaa!”

But the bullet didn’t hit him. Gab hurled himself right into the soldier from behind.

“Wha—?!”

There wasn’t even a moment for the soldier to react. Gab and the enemy became entangled as they rolled down the stairs. Even after crashing into the wall at the landing, they continued to fight. Gab pulled the dagger out of his pocket, but the soldier grabbed his wrist and twisted it into the air. Gab’s brief scream echoed throughout the stairwell’s landing. The soldier then twisted his arm around his back, pushed him to the ground, and sat on top of him, robbing him of all movement. It was a well-practiced move. An amateur engaging in close-quarters combat against an experienced soldier one-on-one was suicide—that was, if Gab really was alone. Atsushi kicked off the stairs and instantly launched toward the soldier, twisting his body in midair before throwing a backfist. His massive tiger arm connected with the soldier’s chin in a blur of speed. His chin wildly swung to the other side of his body, giving him a concussion. The soldier fell to his back.

“Phew...!”

After making sure the enemy was out cold, Atsushi deeply exhaled while wiping the sweat off his head.

“Did you kill him?” Gab timidly asked.

“No, he’s just unconscious,” Atsushi pointed out while getting back to his feet. “Can you stand?”

Atsushi offered a hand—which had already transformed back to normal—to Gab, who sluggishly took it and stood up.

“Ouch... Man, I got a lump on my head now,” Gab grumbled, scowling. “Anyway, what was that? Your arms were freakin’ terrifying for a moment there.”

This was the first time Atsushi had shown his tiger skill to Gab this time around.

“Oh, that? It’s just a little something I can do,” Atsushi said with a slightly bashful laugh. “Anyway, we’re lucky we defeated them before they called for help, but we should probably tie them up and lock them in a room somewhere for safe measure.”

“Hey, uh...” Gab stared at Atsushi while furrowing his brow.

“Yeah?”

“Is it just me, or are you actin’ kinda different?”

Oops. I completely forgot about Matasaburo.

“Eh, whatever. Anyway, would it kill ya to thank me? I saved your life.”

“Now that you mention it...” As if he had just realized it, Atsushi asked, “Why did you come back to save me?”

“Huh? I did it for the boss. Duh. I felt uneasy letting you go alone, so the boss’s number one disciple came back to save your ass. Besides, all the walls were thicker than two inches, so we couldn’t use the boss’s skill anyway.”

It made sense. Without a hiding place, taking out these enemies was their only option.

“Anyway, those were some nice moves you pulled off there. I might be the boss’s number one disciple, but I think you could be his second—nah, too dangerous—you could be a far third? Fourth? Reserve a spot now, and you might even be his fifth-best disciple within the next six or so months.”

“Why does it sound like I’m buying airplane tickets...?”

Noticing Atsushi’s troubled look, Gab rubbed his chin as if to say, “In that case...”

“If you really wanna be number one, then fine. I’m the boss’s number one disciple, so I’ll just make you my number one disciple! You’re the disciple of the Great Phantom Thief’s disciple! Must be a real honor. Feel free to brag to everyone.”

“All right, let’s go with that,” replied Atsushi.

“What are you two doing?! Gab! Matasaburo!”

They heard a deep voice coming from the top of the stairs. It was the boss.

“What happened to that soldier on the ground? If you’re lookin’ for someone to cuddle, then wait until we get our hands on that treasure and some women! Now, come on!”

Atsushi replied to the thunderous roar and began to walk.



Higuchi was standing at the guard post in the storage zone. It was a small room. There wasn’t even any space to walk thanks to three guards being knocked out on the floor. On the table was a wireless transceiver, a logbook, some half-drunken bottle of alcohol, and a few sake glasses. On the wall was a shelf of logbooks and a computer that managed all items that came in to port.

The three guards were holding their stomachs as they lay on the ground, completely still. Higuchi glared down at them as if they were inanimate objects on the floor. Her phone rang.

“Find anything out?”

It was the monotone voice of a dead fighting dog—Akutagawa.

“I checked the island records at the guard post, but so far, I haven’t found any mention of the detective agency even being hired,” reported Higuchi as she looked toward the computer screen.

“So the man-tiger sneaked onto the island without even leaving a

trail... It's as if he wasn't even trying to hide."

"I did find something quite interesting, though," continued Higuchi. "Something seems to have been transported to the island's underground facility not too long ago. It's a bag with some documents inside, and it was sent to the armory on the fifth basement floor."

"What's so interesting about that?"

"This island doesn't have a fifth basement floor, nor does it have an underground armory, according to public record. Therefore, seeing as they seemed to have rushed to get that bag down there—"

"Then it's highly unlikely the bag was carrying documents, yes? It's probably the briefcase. How do we get down there?"

"It appears we need some sort of special authentication key to get inside. Even if we were to blow the door up, that would apparently set off an automatic security device and lock us inside. What do you want to do, sir? We have less than an hour left until noon. At this rate, the weapon underground will—"

"There is nowhere in Yokohama the Port Mafia cannot enter," quietly declared Akutagawa on the other side of the phone. *"I have an idea. Contact headquarters and have them find an accurate blueprint of the island. Send Black Lizard and threaten government personnel if you have to. Time is the enemy. Hurry."*

"Yes, sir." Higuchi began to walk, stepping over the unconscious guards.

"One last thing," Akutagawa began from the other side of the phone. *"Surely there were many guards, judging by how much information you were able to obtain. How did you neutralize them? Submachine guns?"*

She looked down at the guards, then somewhat bashfully admitted, "No... I wasn't confident I could defeat them with force, so I brought them some sake and said it was a gift. They are sound asleep now."

She could hear Akutagawa softly chuckle on the other side of the phone.

"Good work. I will be contacting you again shortly."

He then hung up. Higuchi put away her cell phone, looked at the guards on the floor, then hopped into the air.

"Yay! He complimented me!"



Atsushi and the thieves continued down the stairwell. There hadn't been any commotion since they knocked out the guards. It was as quiet as the bottom of the sea. In fact, it would be no surprise if they actually were close to the bottom of the ocean. There weren't any windows, so it was hard to tell, but it was clear they were far below

sea level due to how many flights of stairs they descended.

“Atsushi, can you hear me?” Atsushi suddenly heard Kunikida’s voice coming from the communicator. *“Everyone in the agency has been searching the island, but there have been no eyewitness reports of the briefcase. It appears it really is most likely in the basement where you’re heading.”*

Atsushi gulped.

That meant he had to find the weapon with not even thirty minutes to spare. And if it really was nearby, then it was only logical to assume the enemy would try to get in his way. Atsushi had to proceed with the utmost caution and haste.

“One more thing. We’re about to lose signal as you descend out of range, so we won’t be able to contact you any longer. If you really need to reach us, then find a landline phone inside.”

Leaving Atsushi with those final words, Kunikida’s voice was soon followed by static before the connection was eventually lost. Atsushi was on his own now.

Unlike the previous floor, the third basement floor was made up of multiple small rooms lined up and looked more like a warship. The hallways were narrow and split up into many sections. They wouldn’t be getting past the guards like this. Fortunately, they had the ability to walk through walls on their side. Despite almost running into the enemy multiple times, Atsushi would inform the boss when a soldier was coming, and the boss would use his skill to escape into another room with everyone.

“Could I say something, Boss?” Virgo immediately asked while looking at his cell phone.

“Sure. You have my permission.”

“If my assumptions are correct, there should be a computer room around here. We need to unlock the vault there if we want to get our hands on the treasure,” claimed Virgo while inspecting a schematic displayed on his phone. “The vault’s walls are too thick for you to use your skill, Boss.”

“What? Why am I just hearing about this now?!”

“I’ve been telling you for the past month...”

“Really? Eh, whatever.” The boss crossed his arms. “Let’s get this over with. You know where to go, right?”

“This way.”

Virgo guided them even farther toward the back. They then circumvented the highly guarded front door to the computer room by going through thin walls to proceed deeper into the room. The computer room was a lot more spacious and emptier than what Atsushi had imagined. It was almost as big as the detective agency, with multiple white square pillars big enough for two adults to hold

hands and wrap their arms around. After a closer look, Atsushi noticed the pillars were actually servers with operational equipment built in. Each one had a small screen.

“Allow me to unlock the vault,” suggested Virgo while stretching a cable out from his cell phone. “It’s going to take a few minutes.”

“Virgo, I need to go to the fifth basement floor,” admitted Atsushi. “Do you think you can get any information on it? Like records of who went inside each room, that sort of thing.”

“...Is it just me, or do you sound different now?” Virgo raised an eyebrow—and impressively so. “Well, I guess it doesn’t matter. You did help us get past the guards, after all. Let me get back to you after I finish this.”

“Thanks,” said Atsushi before he went to the back of the room to check it out. The computer room was split into two areas, but there were no guards on either side. Kicking up dust would only hamper the delicate equipment, and even if guards did find someone suspicious, they wouldn’t want this room to turn into a battle zone. Therefore, this was most likely not even part of the patrol area.

When Atsushi went inside yet another computer room in the back, he gasped. On the other side of the acrylic sheet, similar to the glass used in aquariums, was the ocean itself. They were underwater. The sunlight diagonally pouring into the ocean created a stripe pattern. Calmly swimming in the ocean of blue and gray was a large fish that could only be found offshore. No scenery could have made it clearer to Atsushi as to where he was. This was both an island and a ship, which turned conventional thinking upside down. It was a place where anything could happen.

“Man, what a view.”

Before Atsushi had even realized it, Gab was standing right next to him.

“Whoever made this must’ve been really stupid.”

“Yeah, probably,” replied Atsushi.

“Hey, Matasaburo... Why’d you become a thief?” Gab suddenly asked.

“I’m doing it because I have to,” answered Atsushi. “Countless people’s lives will be in danger if I fail this mission.”

“Dang. So you’re the amazing phantom thief who fights for justice, huh? Nice.”

“You don’t believe me?”

“I believe ya,” smiled Gab. “You’re my number one disciple, after all.”

Oh yeah.

“Gab, you said you became a thief because you wanted to be by the boss’s side, right?” asked Atsushi, figuring Gab would just avoid

the question.

However, Gab plainly admitted, “Yep. I wanna be just like him. I’d never met anyone like him before.”

Atsushi stared in puzzlement.

“The first time we met, I was like, ‘This is it.’ He goes wherever he wants and does whatever he wants. That’s what I wanted. I didn’t feel like I was living before I started doing that. Besides...” While gazing at the ocean through the glass, Gab muttered, “Most things work out in the end if you’ve got someone who’ll stick with you no matter what. Y’know? That’s who the boss is to me.”

Atsushi listened in a daze until he was no longer able to hold it in and started to laugh.

“What are you laughin’ about?!” Gab yelled, looking slightly flushed. “Yeah, I get it! Nobody can understand how I feel!”

“No,” Atsushi replied with a grin, “I actually do get how you feel.”

“Hmph... Hey, Matasaburo, you got anyone in your life like the boss?”

“I do.” Atsushi beamed. “I’ll tell you all about him if we make it out of here safely. He’s even stranger than your boss.”

“No way. Nobody can be—” Gab suddenly paused as he stared into the ocean. “...The hell is that?”

Atsushi turned around while following his gaze. There was *something* in the center of the bluish-black abyss on the other side of the glass. It was falling—sinking into the ocean and sending air bubbles back to the surface. Its eyes locked on to Atsushi, its black fabric wavering—

Atsushi’s mind went blank.

Why?

Why is he here?

Why is he here?!

Their eyes met. Its lips moved, mouthing the words *I found you*.

The black fabric flickered, shredding the acrylic sheet into pieces.

There wasn’t even a moment to scream. Like a blast from an explosion, the seawater rammed into Atsushi’s side. His entire body continued to spin until he had no idea which way was up or down anymore. All he could see was white foam, rendering him oblivious to what was happening around him. But his heartbeat was steady. His consciousness had never been clearer.

I’m being attacked. He’s here—and he probably came to kill me.

It was Akutagawa—a monster in human form.

Atsushi swung his arms around.

Where are the pillars? Where’s the wall? I have to act fast. He’s

actually gonna kill me if I'm at the mercy of the water like this. I have to regain my footing. I have to fight back.

But in spite of Atsushi's strong will, the powerful seawater robbed him of all movement. The torrent tossed his body around like a leaf, slamming him into the pillars, the walls, and the ceiling. What little oxygen he had left gradually escaped from his lungs. As he desperately swung his arms around, he grabbed something. It was the doorknob. He didn't know which way to turn it, so he used his tiger strength to just twist it as hard as he could. There was a clink—the sound of metal snapping before the water pressure immediately destroyed the door. Atsushi's body was thereupon thrown out of the room with the current.

He was in the hallway in front of the door. The water carried his body to the other side. An alarm went off. The facility must have been on red alert after detecting the sudden intrusion of seawater. This wasn't good. Atsushi wouldn't even be able to search for the weapon at this rate.

Were the three thieves okay? The thought flashed across Atsushi's mind, but there was nothing he could do. Akutagawa was approaching, getting closer by the second. A chill ran down Atsushi's spine. This was a gold-coin area. It would be difficult for even the detective agency to get inside, which was why they had to rely on the thief's skill. But Akutagawa easily broke in. He cut through the glass from outside in the ocean—an extraordinary feat.

Atsushi dug his tiger claws into the wall. The seawater flowing through the hallway was no higher than his waist, but even then, the current was still a real threat. It felt as if his lower half was going to be torn right off his body. His tiger claws dragged against the wall as he was pushed back until four long, parallel lines were carved into the surface.

Out of nowhere, he was hit in the shoulder. The black fabric had shot over like a beam of light and cut right through the top of his torso. Fresh blood seeped into the seawater, shortly followed by pain. After the impact caused Atsushi to let go of the wall, he was pushed even farther back by the current. But his body almost immediately came to a sudden stop. Something grabbed on to his arm—something black. He was instinctively stricken with horror before he even checked what it was. Being swept away by the powerful current would be *better* than this. It would be over the moment Akutagawa got ahold of him. Atsushi turned his tiger arm back to normal, then immediately slipped his arm from the black fabric's grasp. But since the hallway was shaped like an L at the end, the torrent slammed Atsushi's back right into the wall.

Thankfully, this slowed him down, giving him time to look

around. Atsushi gazed up ahead—there he was, freely using his black fabric to pierce the ceiling and walls to keep himself from moving. It was as if the torrent of seawater didn't even exist. He fixed his bloodthirsty eyes on Atsushi.

“Akutagawa...!”

“Your efforts deserve praise, Man-Tiger.” His husky voice was somehow audible even amid the roaring current of the sea. “No matter how many times I almost kill you, you somehow manage to survive, and yet you still get in my way. That tenacity, that luck—you are worthy of being my trial.”

Murderous rage radiated from his body. His expression was cold, as if he were the only one in an empty world.

I have to run. I have to get as far away from him as possible. Narrow, long hallways like this are his territory.

Akutagawa's overcoat writhed. A dark beast emerged from the fabric. Despite being nothing more than a thin piece of material, it transformed a three-dimensional monster. No gun nor fire could stop Akutagawa's skill. It could not be broken. All Atsushi could do was continue to dodge.

However, the dark beast rushed toward him, engulfing the entire hallway. Atsushi kicked off the wall and jumped toward the end of the path. The beast's fangs then tore through the wall, leaving a massive hole the size of a cannonball. The monster closed in on him. Figuring the water would slow him down, Atsushi used his tiger arms and legs to sprint down a wall like a wild animal.

I can't fight Akutagawa. I've got both distance and location working against me here. Even if I did somehow manage to beat him, I wouldn't be able to find the weapon by noon.

But Atsushi was met with even further despair. The shutter up ahead was slowly closing. It was probably an automatic safety mechanism installed to prevent seawater from getting into the basement. Atsushi was going to lose his only escape route at this rate. The black fabric filled the hallway. If he were pushed back into a dead end, he wouldn't be able to fend off all the attacks with his claws.

The shutter was slowly closing from the bottom up. The opening was no larger than three feet wide.

Will I make it in time? I have to, or I'm dead. Just a little more—

His body suddenly slowed down before stumbling forward and slamming into the wall. His brain rattled, and he saw a flash of stars.

“Gwah...!”

Atsushi saw it out of the corner of his eye—black fabric sprang off the wall and wrapped itself around his ankle.

“There is something elegant about hunting a running tiger, but I've grown bored of staring at your back,” scoffed Akutagawa from

behind. The black fabric curled around Atsushi's leg like a snake. It wouldn't be long until it wrapped around his chest and pierced his heart.

After reverting his legs back to normal and loosening the fabric's grip, Atsushi kicked off the wall and escaped before landing into the seawater on the floor of the hallway.

"I see you are just as quick to run away as ever, Man-Tiger." Akutagawa approached Atsushi with a calm expression. "But there is nowhere left for you to run. Fight me."

He was right. The shutter had already closed. All that was left was the dead end of a narrow hallway. Two strips of black fabric shot in Atsushi's direction like javelins. Atsushi immediately lifted his tiger arms up to block them, but the piercing blades of darkness, sharper than any blade in the world, dug into his fur as they slid around his arms. Even with his tiger coat, which could easily reflect bullets, Atsushi still couldn't completely block Akutagawa's attacks, sending strands of white fur flying into the air.

The only thing that could compete with Akutagawa's skill was Atsushi's tiger limbs. One hit to the face or body, however, would be fatal. The only way Atsushi could cut through his opponent and escape would be to bring the fight within grappling range while dodging any shots to these vital areas. Regardless, there was no way he could approach Akutagawa while dodging his attacks, which essentially covered the entire hallway.

"Remember death, for it is by your side. Beg it for forgiveness, for it is waiting for you. You will perish at the bowels of the earth. It doesn't feel so bad, does it?"

"Did you come all the way to this island to kill me?" asked Atsushi in a trembling voice. "Do you really hate me that much?"

"It isn't hate. I cannot move forward until I tear you apart."

Atsushi slowly retreated. While he wouldn't have a chance if he didn't get close up, the space between them was a kill zone. He couldn't fight Akutagawa head-on. He had to create an opening...

"Dazai's here, too!"

"I know. Therefore, I have to take your head for his sake as well."

As Akutagawa took a step forward, Atsushi took a step back. His back hit the wall. It was the watertight shutter. There was nowhere left to retreat. It wouldn't be possible to persuade Akutagawa to stop. All Atsushi could do was move forward, prepared for the worst. He lowered his stance. Seeing the fight in his eyes, Akutagawa faintly smirked. Atsushi tightened his leg muscles—

—but all of a sudden, two arms emerged from the shutter *behind* him.

"What are you, stupid?! Get over here!"

The arms grabbed the back of his collar, then immediately tugged him backward. Atsushi slipped through the shutter before even realizing what was happening. He rolled on the ground with a splash. It was the boss's burly arms that had grabbed his collar.

"What kind of idiot tries to fight against someone with a skill like that?! Thieves don't win by fighting. Thieves steal without fighting! I'm disappointed in you, Matasaburo!"

Atsushi finally realized what had happened. The boss used his skill to drag him to the other side. Atsushi didn't check how thick the shutter was, so he never even dreamed this would happen.

The shutter's thickness...

"He's not going to give up, Boss!" screamed Atsushi. "He'd easily be able to cut through an iron shutter that's not even two inches thick! We have to run!"

"I was planning on doing that anyway! Let's go!"

The boss effortlessly tucked Atsushi under his arm and went through a door leading into a nearby room. Immediately, the sound of the shutter being shredded echoed, followed by the sound of its remains splashing into the water. Akutagawa had already come after them.

They found themselves on a narrow path used for pipe maintenance. The boss had to turn sideways to squeeze his massive body through. After every new door they found, he would use his skill to go through, and they would run even farther away. They continued heading deeper until they eventually reached a staircase leading to the fourth basement floor. After letting Atsushi down, the boss deeply exhaled.

"You know him?" asked the boss while wiping the sweat off his shining forehead.

"Yes," replied Atsushi while trying to catch his breath. "Akutagawa. He's a skill user involved in organized crime."

"Huh, Matasaburo. You run with a tougher crowd than I thought." The boss frowned. "I'm gonna go get Gab and Virgo. I stuffed 'em in a locked room earlier, so you don't need to worry about them being killed."

"I'll—"

Before Atsushi could even finish his sentence...

"You go on ahead. The guards will be coming in swarms to the third basement floor, so the bottom floor should be relatively empty. We're gonna wait things out for a while, then go grab our treasure when the coast is clear." The boss grinned. "Oh yeah. I almost forgot. When I saved Virgo, he said he found traces of someone who had *just* brought a briefcase to the armory on the fifth basement floor. Does that help?"

So that really was where the weapon was being kept hidden.

"Thank you so much." Atsushi stood.

Akutagawa's after me. If the boss and the others run away, he probably won't pursue them. Anyway, there's no time. I've gotta stop the weapon.

Right as Atsushi started to descend the staircase...

"Matasaburo." The boss called out his name and stopped him. Atsushi turned around.

"Yes?"

"What's your real name?"

Atsushi, taken by surprise, fell silent. He then thought for a few moments before saying, "Atsushi."

"Atsushi, huh?" the boss repeated, smiling. "After this is all over, I want to hear what you really came here to do and why you pretended to be a thief to do it."

He got me.

Atsushi's spine tingled. The boss had seen right through him.

"Now, go. And don't die, Atsushi."

"...I won't!"

Atsushi sprinted down the stairs.



After making it to the fourth basement floor, Atsushi began to hear a nearby roar like the revving of some giant machine's engine. He calculated that the engine room that moved the island had to be on the other side of the wall, since the documents he reviewed before the mission showed two things this deep inside the island: a blast room that gave it buoyancy and a propeller that doubled as a turbine for wave-activated energy generation.

The fourth basement floor was quiet. There were a few soldiers standing at their post, but Atsushi didn't see anyone on patrol. Most were probably rushing to the third basement floor to help. After all, the glass had shattered, allowing seawater and an intruder inside. Security headquarters was surely a madhouse right about now. There was no time for them to worry about the other floors. It looked as if Akutagawa's attack surprisingly acted as a diversion.

This floor had a different atmosphere to it compared with the others. The interior was reminiscent of a windowless office building with a conference room, staff offices, a general affairs room, and a storage room for documents. Atsushi was reminded just how chaotically this island was built. It was as if each floor had been created by a different person without any communication between them and then simply mashed together.

When passing by what appeared to be the conference room, Atsushi suddenly caught sight of the clock. It was 11:45. There were only fifteen minutes left, but his destination wasn't far. It wouldn't be long before he reached the armory. But a sudden bout of curiosity convinced Atsushi to take a peek inside the conference room. It was empty. The other three walls besides the entrance were giant screens. In the center of the room was a round table with telephones, sound collectors, and what appeared to be other communication devices lined up in the middle of the table. There were three of each item, with one of each type facing one of the three walls. The screens on the wall were currently turned off and completely black. A small flag was stuck to the top right of each screen: England's, France's, and Germany's.

Atsushi recalled how the island was governed by three different countries. But what was this room? What were these large screens used for? More importantly, what was this gold-coin area even used for? Why was there a place this strictly protected?

But those questions soon disappeared from his mind. These last fifteen minutes—perhaps the most important fifteen minutes in the entire world—were what mattered now. Atsushi shook those questions out of his head, then focused solely on his ears and legs.

It wasn't long before Atsushi found the stairs to the fifth basement floor. Even though he'd been down here for a while by this point, he was just now thinking about how inconvenient it was that the stairs to different floors were spread apart like this. It would be a long journey for someone if they wanted to go from the second basement floor to the fifth basement floor. Perhaps they made it this way on purpose for security reasons. It wasn't convenient, but it would definitely prevent intruders from getting inside and escaping.

All of a sudden, Atsushi heard a voice coming from the stairwell landing, causing him to promptly hide. Four guards were talking about something, and one of them sounded very familiar: It was the colonel's voice. They hadn't noticed Atsushi yet. The colonel briefly gave his men orders, and they held their guns at the ready, lined up in rows, then began heading up the staircase before disappearing down the hallway.

Atsushi exhaled. It would be reckless to fight them head-on, so he silently descended to the fifth basement floor without being noticed. The moment he arrived, he ran into a wall.

"Uh..."

This wasn't a metaphor but a literal, physical wall. The shutter was closed right at the bottom of the staircase before the fifth basement floor. Atsushi touched the wall. It was the same type of shutter as the one used earlier to prevent flooding.

Maybe it automatically closed to prevent the hallway from flooding back when Akutagawa broke in? But then why was the shutter not closed on the last floor? Did they know I was coming?

But the problem solved itself before Atsushi could even come up with a solution. The shutter opened right before his eyes like an automatic door. Startled, he leaped back. He thought it was going to be a trap, but there was nobody on the other side. It was far too convenient to have been a coincidence. Perhaps Dazai or one of the thieves remotely opened it for him. It wasn't clear why it was open, but there was no reason not to enter.

Atsushi advanced with hushed footsteps. The fifth basement floor—the island's innermost secret—was different from any other floor so far. The first difference was that there were no guards. While the other floors didn't have many to begin with, this floor had absolutely none. The only sound was the roaring of machinery. It looked like the inside of a military base. In addition, each door in the hallway was firmly closed. They were sturdy, fireproof doors shut so tight that there were no cracks to even slip a thin sheet of paper through. There were no small windows on the door, either, so it was impossible to know what the inside of these rooms was like. Moreover, each door looked exactly the same, so there was no way to guess what room was what.

"This isn't good," Atsushi muttered to himself.

Virgo said the briefcase was brought to the armory, but Atsushi didn't even know where that was.

There's no time. No way I can search every room and find the weapon. What should I do?

But Atsushi then thought:

Sometimes one problem can solve another, just like how one problem's solution can lead to new questions in mystery novels.

The door right next to Atsushi spontaneously opened. Startled, Atsushi leaped back, but there was nobody there, which meant the door had been opened from the inside. The room was dark, so it was hard to see anything. Atsushi had his guard up just in case a trap was about to go off, but the only sound he heard was the sound of the door opening. Other than that, there was the roaring of the engine room in the distance.

It was just like the shutter a moment ago. Was Dazai or somebody opening the door for him? Or was the hacker Katai able to break into the system? Whatever the case, it changed nothing. Atsushi's only choice was to move forward.

He went inside the room. It didn't seem like the armory at first glance. It didn't look like a room for anything, in fact. It was nothing more than a small, square chamber with indirect lighting on the ceiling. Hanging on the wall's iron netting were a few bizarre gun-like

machines that Atsushi had never seen before. Nevertheless, he wasn't concerned with the room's interior. His eyes were locked on what was on the desk in the center of the room—a black briefcase.

It had a plain, practical design and was reinforced with metal, and it was average in size. Atsushi would be able to wrap an arm all the way around it. While it was sturdily made and of high quality, there was nothing about it that would make it stand out if one were to see someone carrying it around town.

Atsushi picked up the briefcase. It was light. It felt as if something made of metal was inside, but it was still light enough for him to carry it without even using his tiger skill. The problem was what to do with it now... The surest way to deal with it would be to have Dazai open it and touch the camera inside. His skill allowed him to nullify all skills simply through physical contact. He would undeniably be able to neutralize the skill weapon inside.

The next-best option would be to find the creator of the weapon, Wells. She should know how to disarm it. Atsushi took hold of the briefcase and stealthily began returning along the path he'd come from.



Atsushi ran through the hallway. From here on out, he was going for speed rather than accuracy and force rather than stealth. He needed to get past the enemy's line of defense even if it meant using a little force. After all, he needed to go through the third basement floor first, which was currently swarming with soldiers, if he wanted to make it back to the surface. Being quiet was essentially pointless. Atsushi ran up the staircase and returned to the fourth basement floor. There were a few shutters closed, perhaps due to water getting inside. The quickest route back to the surface was sealed, which meant Atsushi had to search for another way to return.

After turning the corner and running even farther, Atsushi came to a sudden stop. There was a guard up ahead who was thankfully looking the other way. Atsushi swiftly slipped into the darkness.

Now what? I can't disappear into a wall and hide without the boss. I could search for another route, but I might get lost if I run around too much. What would Dazai do during a time like this? What about Kunikida? Or the other detectives?

There was only one soldier, and he had his back turned to Atsushi. Time to use force.

Atsushi threw the briefcase low to the floor so that it would slide on the ground. After the briefcase slid between the enemy's legs, the soldier followed it with his eyes in utter bewilderment. Atsushi

wrapped his right arm around the soldier's neck, making a triangle to squeeze his carotid arteries. He rested his right hand on his left bicep before placing his left hand behind the soldier's head, thus completely locking his arms. The soldier was slightly taller than Atsushi, so he had to jump on his back. The soldier tried to break Atsushi's grip, restlessly tearing at his arms, but Atsushi's tight hold didn't loosen. After all, it was extremely difficult to get out of a tight choke hold. The soldier struggled to latch on to Atsushi's arm, ear, or anything he could get his hands on, but he soon lost consciousness before collapsing to the floor.

Atsushi could have killed him if he'd cut off his opponent's windpipe, but he chose to go after the carotid arteries to simply knock him unconscious. This was one of the moves Kunikida had beaten into him over time during their work at the agency together.

After glancing at the unconscious soldier out of the corner of his eye, Atsushi reached for the briefcase and grabbed the handle. Immediately, he felt a powerful force hit him in the shoulder and was sent flying through the air. Every bone in his body wailed. He'd been *shot*. Only when he did a half rotation in the air and landed on his back did he realize it. Everything was just a blur. Only a few moments went by before a large, heavy foot stepped onto Atsushi's shoulder.

"Target down!"

It was a muffled voice coming from behind a bulletproof mask. When Atsushi opened his eyes, three fully armed soldiers were surrounding him with their rifles while one of them was holding Atsushi down with his foot.

"We have secured the target at Point A as planned. He was shot, but he's still alive," reported the soldier over his wireless transceiver.

They got me.

It was an ambush.

The soldiers had predicted the path Atsushi was going to take and waited with their guns drawn. It was an obvious trap, in retrospect. They lowered the shutters, forcing him to change routes, and left a defenseless soldier in the hallway with his back turned.

The briefcase—where is it? I have to stop that weapon!

Out of the corner of his eye, Atsushi found the black briefcase lying on the floor away from him. Four million people's lives were at risk. As Atsushi tried to reach out, he was immediately met with an unbearable bolt of pain from being shot and having his wound stepped on.

"Guh...!"

"Don't move," the soldier demanded coldly. "We have the authority to fire at anyone who infiltrates this zone. If you resist, you will be disposed of immediately."

“There’s no time...for this...!” groaned Atsushi through clenched teeth. “The briefcase... That’s the terrorist’s weapon... We have to stop it!”

“I see. So this is what the terrorist was after...”

Atsushi suddenly heard a familiar voice.

“What a shrewd terrorist, sending one of his lackeys to steal the weapon... You wouldn’t expect a loner to pull such a sly trick, but I was completely fooled.”

“Colonel!” Atsushi muttered as he looked at the man’s face.

“Have we met before, young man?” The colonel raised an eyebrow. “The terrorist even knows what I look like... He must have secured quite the source. These are troubling times we live in.”

The colonel drew a pistol.

“Now, we were increasing security in order to capture the terrorist—the Foreseer—when there was a commotion on the third basement floor. Furthermore, we learned that the security cameras had been tampered with and weren’t functioning properly. We realized that just moments ago when the security cameras returned to normal for some reason, and we saw you with that briefcase walking through the fourth basement floor. Do you know what I’m getting at here, terrorist?”

The cameras started functioning normally again? So that was how they were able to ambush me?

Whatever. That doesn’t matter right now.

“I’m not a terrorist!” shouted Atsushi. “The terrorist is after that briefcase! They want to blow this whole place up! We only have until noon to destroy the weapon inside the briefcase...!”

Atsushi quickly racked his brain. The terrorist wouldn’t be able to get their hands on the weapon as long as this well-organized army was guarding it.

“Forget about me—just protect that weapon! Have multiple people guard it at all times, and if you are by chance attacked, then just throw it into the ocean and—”

“You’re talking about so many different things at once. I’m old,” said the colonel as if he were trying to calm Atsushi down. “Let me get this straight. The terrorist is going to use this weapon to destroy the region, which is why you decided to sneak into the fifth basement floor and steal it yourself so you could bring it somewhere safe.”

“Exactly,” agreed Atsushi.

Immediately, Atsushi felt a sharp pain in his head. He looked up in surprise and immediately noticed that it wasn’t caused by any physical pain. It was inside his head. A strong sensation was pushing against his head from the inside.

“For goodness’ sake... I thought we finally caught one of the

terrorist's men, but now we're getting even more nonsense we have to deal with." The colonel scratched his chin. "You don't seem to be lying, but how am I going to explain this back to the homeland?"

The cause of the pain was a feeling that something was wrong. The strong sensation grew like a bubble in Atsushi's head, and it was trying to subconsciously tell him something.

What was it? Something was off. Atsushi didn't have the brains to engineer elaborate plots or see right through things like Dazai, but he had personally witnessed everything that had happened with this case. That was why *it* appeared as pain, trying to tell Atsushi something. It went deeper than simply being able to think quickly.

The fifth basement floor—the colonel said it himself.

He also said he noticed the surveillance cameras had been tampered with when he saw me walking through the fourth basement floor with the briefcase.

In other words: How would the colonel have known that this briefcase was on the fifth basement floor?

How was he so sure it was the fifth basement floor? Atsushi looked at the colonel, and the colonel looked back at him. All it took was that brief glance for them to read each other. Atsushi felt as if he could see the colonel's mind stiffening, while the colonel seemed to have noticed Atsushi realized something dangerous from his expression. There was a clear, cold glow in the colonel's eyes that wasn't there before—the heartless glow of a traitor.

Atsushi was in trouble.

"Men, lower your weapons."

The colonel suddenly gave orders to the soldiers.

"Don't...!" reflexively shouted Atsushi. "Don't lower your weapons!"

The soldiers unquestioningly lowered their weapons as told by their superior and waited for their next order. But instead of another order, the colonel unloaded his pistol's bullets into his subordinates. Their throats were instantly pierced, and they fell to the ground without even a second to move their fingers.

"What...?!"

Then he shot Atsushi in the torso before he could even react. Atsushi instantly twisted his body to protect his vital organs, but the bullet went straight through the right side of his chest and passed right by his lungs. Atsushi howled a silent scream.

"You never know what's going to happen when you try to do something big."

The colonel checked how many bullets he had left, threw the magazine to the ground, and loaded the pistol with a new one.

"I can't believe you even knew what time the fireworks were

going to start. Either you received divine assistance from the island's rumored guardian...or perhaps you used some sort of skill?"

"Mn...!"

Atsushi groaned through the taste of blood in his throat. His lungs were burning. His arms wouldn't move. But he had to do something. At this rate...

"I'm not a skill user, but I used to have a subordinate who was. He boasted strength that went beyond the realm of what was considered human and was even called a hero on the battlefield. He's dead now, though... All heroes die young."

The colonel slid the breechblock with a practiced hand, sending a bullet into the chamber.



“But...why...?” moaned Atsushi.

The colonel looked down at him.

“I have no intention of explaining myself to you.” His chilling voice echoed. “You wouldn’t understand. The only way I can awaken someone who is in a deep slumber is by making a loud noise... That’s it.”

The colonel picked up the briefcase and reached for the lock.

Crap—he’s gonna use the weapon here!

Atsushi tried to get up. He tried to scream while throwing himself at the colonel. But the only noise he made was the sound of his throat gurgling blood as it dripped down his lips.

“You can still move?” The colonel pointed the gun at Atsushi on the ground. “Sorry for making you suffer.”

The bullet went through Atsushi’s throat.



Atsushi hated pain.

But pain had been an intimate part of his life for as long as he could remember. The pain of being stabbed, the pain from being punched, the pain of his hands numbing in the cold, pain inside his head, the pain of hunger—suffering clung to Atsushi like clothing, shaping him. Pain made Atsushi feel like himself. He didn’t know any other way to experience this feeling.

After joining the detective agency, the nature of the pain changed, he got hurt less often, and he stopped feeling miserable. Instead, the crushing pressure of necessity tore at Atsushi’s flesh. It split open his shoulder, pierced his chest, and snapped off his leg. The agony was so unbearable that it was as if he could feel his soul leaving his body, but even then, he fought through the pain because it was worth it. He knew he could stubbornly resist the pain no matter how bad it got.

There’s a beast inside me, thought Atsushi. And that’s not a metaphor. There’s a literal beast inside me. Right now, he’s howling and wildly feasting as he rampages. For some reason or another, he seems to have the power to negate wounds. Not the power to heal them or to recover but to negate. The reason he’s able to do this isn’t totally unrelated to my birth, probably. It’s not unrelated to the suffering I’ve had to bear all these years.

The beast—the tiger—is a manifestation of something within me. I still don’t know what that something is, but if he commands me to stand, then I can’t not stand—just like if he negates my wounds, then my wounds have no choice but to disappear.

Atsushi sprang to his feet. The wound on his chest had already stopped bleeding. There was still blood coming from the bullet wound on his neck, but it was nothing serious enough to hinder his movement.

“What?!”

The colonel raised his pistol and shot. A bullet pierced Atsushi in the thigh, tearing away at his flesh. It felt as if someone had taken a saw and cut through his nerves, but it wasn't enough to prevent him from moving. Atsushi charged forward, baring his fangs. The colonel backed up, seemingly overwhelmed by his spirit. Transforming his arms and legs into the claws of a white tiger, Atsushi's muscles exploded in size as his white fur stood up on end.

“So you're a skill user as well...!”

The colonel retreated while shooting his pistol, but Atsushi lifted his arms and blocked the bullets. With the briefcase in hand, the colonel disappeared around the hallway corner. If Atsushi were to leave him alone for too long, he would undoubtedly activate the weapon. Ignoring the pain in his leg, he chased after the colonel. An ill-omened creak echoed down the hallway. Atsushi immediately rushed around the corner, only to find that a shutter was rising between the colonel and him. The colonel must have had manually inputted something into the control panel on the wall.

“You're not getting away from me!”

His tiger fur rose; his muscles groaned like iron wire being twisted together, accelerating his body. One step. Another step forward. The shutter had already closed halfway as it rose from the bottom. Atsushi's wounds foamed as they closed. His walking turned into jogging. His jogging transformed into sprinting. Atsushi jumped. As if he were doing the high jump in a competition, he twisted his body in the air as the shutter was close to completely closing. Brushing against the ceiling, he slipped over the rising shutter, but only then did he realize his mistake.

Damn...

The colonel was no longer there, and only the briefcase lay where he once was. Because...he was right under Atsushi. With his body leaning against the shutter, he aimed his pistol into the air.

“Welcome.”

And with that greeting, he instantly unloaded his entire magazine on Atsushi. With no way to dodge midair, Atsushi was hit in the stomach. Fresh blood spewed onto the ceiling. Furthermore, after losing momentum midjump, Atsushi's leg—namely everything below the knee—got caught in the closing shutter.

“GWAAAAAAH!!”

Like the closing jaws of a beast, the shutter slipped into the

ceiling. Not even Atsushi's powerful tiger leg could withstand the watertight seal designed to endure hydraulic pressure. The bones in his leg snapped as the sound of meat being crushed reverberated from the ceiling.

"I heard that Yokohama was a city of demons," said the colonel as he loaded a new magazine into his gun, "but I never expected to be this close to losing everything to a young man with a skill such as yours."

Atsushi hung upside down by his leg caught in the shutter. He wriggled and tried to pull himself free, but his tiger leg was simply too powerful to tear off and escape.

"Do you know why this zone exists?" asked the colonel as he reached for the briefcase. "This island was created as a symbol for peace after the war. Three deranged nations—countries who fought one another, killed one another, and soon even forgot why they started the war in the first place—created this island with what little sanity they had as a stage for peaceful negotiations. However..."

The colonel sat on the floor and reached for the briefcase's lock.

"They don't understand a thing. A few handshakes and papers signed aren't enough to stop the war. The nightmares—the evils—created in that hell must be brought to light...or my men's souls will never be saved."

"Stop... You can't...!" moaned Atsushi.

"Noon was the time my men were given orders to attack. By our own headquarters, even. But it was all just a scheme to turn them into war criminals—traitors. They ran for their lives while people called them the Mimic soldiers, and eventually...they drifted to Yokohama and died in vain, from what I hear... I could have stopped that fool's scheme, but I did nothing. This is my atonement."

Atsushi let out an indescribable scream. Agonizing pain clouded his vision.

"You people did nothing wrong, but without these colossal fireworks, my words will never reach another soul... With the activation of this weapon, the truth about my men who died will be revealed to the world. If the Yokohama Settlement and the various nations' military parties within it are wiped off the face of the earth, there will be no way for their governments to hide the truth."

Nothing I say will change his mind. He plans on dying for a cause that nobody else could possibly understand...along with four million others. I have to stop him, even if I tear off my leg in the process.

Atsushi placed both hands on the wall and tried to push himself forward. As his bones and tendons creaked, the colonel looked up at him with a sorrowful smile, briefcase in hand.

I can't—!

After clicking free the toggle, the colonel opened the briefcase—

—and white smoke spewed out from inside.

“...?!”

Both Atsushi and the colonel let out a shout of surprise. Something set off a trap to release gas inside, which immediately enshrouded the colonel’s entire body. He coughed.

“Impossible... This isn’t it...?!”

Atsushi had no idea what was going on. The white smoke filling the hallway soon reached him as well. After breathing in a whiff of the gas through his nose, Atsushi’s consciousness immediately started to waver. It was poisonous gas—knockout gas.

Don’t tell me...

“Whew. I’m sure glad I had a backup plan.”

He heard a familiar voice from the other side of the smoke. It was...

“Da...zai...?”

Atsushi could hear the shutter move as he faded out of consciousness. After it finally released his leg, he fell to the floor.

“I predicted early on that the person behind this was one of the higher-ups on the island. Therefore, it was extremely likely the weapon was hidden somewhere only he could go. That’s why I used bait.”

The shutter on the fifth basement floor that automatically opened and the door to the armory... It was all too easy. Furthermore, the security cameras’ returning to normal was all too convenient. Everything was part of Dazai’s plan. He had Atsushi carry a fake and purposely let the enemy steal that from him.

“Atsushi, feel free to take a nap and just leave the rest to us.”

Atsushi’s consciousness rapidly began to depart this world. The silhouette said to let them handle it, so there was nothing to worry about anymore. Atsushi felt as if he had said something in return, but before he could even comprehend what that was, his consciousness was swallowed up by the blinding darkness.



When Atsushi came to, he found himself in a bed somewhere.

“You awake?”

He heard a voice next to him. It was Kunikida’s. Atsushi had no idea where he was or what he was doing for the first few moments he was awake. It was an odd feeling, as if he had a dream where he’d left

behind something very dear to him and then fell into a deep slumber before eventually waking up.

Where am I? What was I dreaming about? I was shot, got my leg caught in something, and breathed in some sort of gas...

Gas. Weapon. Four million people.

“What time is it?!” Atsushi jumped out of bed.

“Relax,” Kunikida suggested while writing something in his notebook at Atsushi’s bedside.

When Atsushi took a closer look, he realized he was in his room at the hotel they’d come to when they first arrived.

“Dr. Yosano took care of your injuries. You really did a number on yourself back there.”

That was when Atsushi noticed that his bullet wounds and almost-severed leg were back to normal. He looked around. There was nobody else in the room. He felt déjà vu. He hurt his leg, woke up, and found Kunikida at his side. When did all that happen? He couldn’t remember.

“Yokohama avoided destruction thanks to your strenuous efforts,” said Kunikida with his eyes still looking down at his notebook. “The colonel was arrested and put under confinement. The thieves were also captured. The guards caught them strolling around outside with the jeweled truffles.”

They got caught...

Atsushi imagined the boss and his men walking around town, proudly showing off their spoils of war.

“Now for the weapon—the real weapon is still being kept in an isolated shelter at the end of the fifth basement floor. The colonel made a full confession, but the weapon was hidden inside a special safe that can apparently only be opened with a password and the colonel’s fingerprint. In other words, your mission to find and secure the weapon was impossible from the start.”

An impossible mission...

But the threat was prevented all because the colonel fell for the fake briefcase.

“So Dazai set that trap because he knew that was going to happen?”

“Yes.” Kunikida slightly lifted his gaze and stared off into space. “This is how Dazai explained it: The enemy was cautious, and he would do anything to prevent the weapon from being stolen. If getting the weapon wasn’t possible, then capturing the enemy was our only choice. Therefore, he used the captain to place a fake briefcase in the armory. Then Dazai would have you steal that one, fix the security cameras, and show the footage to the enemy. And just like he planned, the colonel didn’t realize the briefcase was a fake. He opened it and

was knocked out by the gas inside.”

Now that he mentioned it, the colonel did say something about the security cameras returning to normal and seeing Atsushi walking around the fourth basement floor. Atsushi hadn't really put much thought into it at the time, but Dazai arranged for that to happen to *purposely show the colonel* that Atsushi had stolen the briefcase. He lured the colonel into a trap, making him believe it was the real thing. Both Atsushi and the colonel were dancing in the palm of Dazai's hand from the beginning.

I wish he'd at least told me the truth...

While Atsushi wasn't without disappointment, he knew he would've never been able to pull off this brilliant performance if Dazai had, in fact, asked him to make the enemy think the briefcase was the real thing. The truth would be written all over his face. No way a seasoned colonel wouldn't notice.

At any rate, the case had been solved, and the detective agency's work was done. All that was left was to pack up and leave the island. Nevertheless, Atsushi wondered if he could do a little sightseeing before going. He'd packed with the expectation of staying the night, after all.

Maybe an overnight sugoroku tournament with all the agency members...

“Now...,” Kunikida suddenly said as he stood up and closed his notebook. “I'm off to go pick up the weapon. The captain and Dazai should be in the basement by now. The special operations division gave us orders to retrieve the weapon and bring it back. *Sigh...* We just can't catch a break.”

Kunikida then looked over at Atsushi to see how he was doing. “Want to come?”

Atsushi hesitated for a few moments.

“No, I'm fine,” he replied while shaking his head.

Atsushi already had somewhere he wanted to go.



The band of thieves were apparently being kept in the same hostage cellar where Kunikida and Atsushi had been held captive last time. According to Kunikida, they made sure the boss wouldn't be able to escape using his skill, so there was nothing to worry about.

Atsushi had just one thing on his mind as he walked to visit them: Was there any way he could grant them a pardon? Sure, they were criminals, but they weren't bad people. There was something about them that you just couldn't hate. Besides, four million people would have died without their help. Was there no way to negotiate things

with the special operations division and have them released?

They would have to vow never to commit another crime, but the boss would surely never quit being a thief. He was probably harder to convince than the Special Division for Unusual Powers.

How should I explain all this to him...?

By the time Atsushi had finished that thought, he'd ended up walking all the way to the hostage cellar. There were no guards. Everyone was probably too busy handling and cleaning up after the colonel. Atsushi knocked on the iron door, which creaked open on its own.

Oh? Are they not being held here? Maybe they were handcuffed with some sort of special device, so they didn't even need to lock the door?

Or maybe...they already got away? But so quickly...?

I guess Kunikida was right. Maybe the boss should start calling himself the Master of Escape instead.

Atsushi quickly opened the door all the way and looked inside, but all his predictions were off.

Inside the room was Virgo. Dead.

“...?!”

Atsushi's head went blank.

He was dead. There was no mistake about it. His throat had been sliced open, and he had died in a pool of his own blood. His eyes were open as if he had taken his last breath the second before he realized what had happened to himself. He hadn't been dead for long, perhaps no more than five or six minutes.

Why? Why Virgo?

Atsushi thought back to when Virgo was alive. He thought about his weary clerk-like demeanor and how he was always at his wits' end dealing with the boss's recklessness. But even then, Virgo was a talented engineer and an essential member to the band of thieves.

Why would somebody kill Virgo? Judging by the time of death, he was murdered after the colonel was knocked out by the gas. The colonel couldn't have been the one who did it. But then...who?

Atsushi looked at the ground. Pools of blood seemed to seep out of the floor. Bloody footprints continued to the exit, but they were incomplete, so it was hard to tell the size of murderer's foot or what kind of shoes they were wearing. Nevertheless, it was clear that the one who did this walked with relatively long strides.

The three thieves were supposedly locked in this room together, which meant Gab and the boss were still alive...or were not killed here at the very least.

Atsushi found something burned under the table, slightly away

from the body. It was a piece of blackened metal plate. Atsushi had seen this before. It was a piece of the flash bomb the boss hid in his body with his skill. In other words, the boss must have run away.

But who had come here and killed Virgo? Surely Gab and the boss must have been startled, but he was able to quickly use the flash bomb and escape. He must've gone straight through the door with Gab. These were probably their footprints when they got away. The murderer was likely still chasing after them as well. Just when Atsushi was about to run after the footprints, his cell phone rang.

"Atsushi, where are you?!" Kunikida demanded on the other side of the phone.

"Kunikida, I—"

"The weapon's gone!" yelled Kunikida, cutting him off. *"The safe was open when we got there, and the weapon was already gone! We found the colonel's severed hand by the safe. The criminal must have used his fingerprint to open it!"*

"What?! Is the colonel—?"

"He was killed the moment the guard took his eyes off him."

What was going on? The terrorist—the colonel—was killed? Why? Who would do such a thing? Was the colonel not the real mastermind behind all this?

"It seems like there's still more to this case than we thought."

Kunikida's voice was tenser than anyone else's Atsushi had heard today.

"This is nothing more than mere speculation, but someone was probably using the colonel to activate the weapon for them. While prediction and assumptions could be dangerous...everything would make sense if that were the case. The colonel was killed to keep him quiet."

A mastermind pulling the strings...

The real terrorist...

"This is an emergency. Find the weapon. Dazai and I will search underground. You search the surface. I don't care if you have to beat up every suspicious person you run into! Find it!"

It must have been an emergency if Kunikida was willing to go so such extremes. After replying, Atsushi hung up. Phone still in hand, he thought about everyone involved that he had met so far. Was there really someone else behind all this?

Kunikida had mentioned the colonel's hand had been cut off—the first thing that came to Atsushi's mind was Akutagawa's skill. But his actions wouldn't make sense if he were the one behind this. Breaking into the island's underground zone from the sea just to kill Atsushi would be pointless. Besides, he didn't have a motive, either. Activating the weapon would turn the Port Mafia's territory to ash as well.

Then who? Someone with a motive and the capabilities, and who could easily use a soldier like the colonel as one of their pawns...

Atsushi couldn't think of anyone who matched that description—
—aside from one person.

No... It couldn't be.

But no one else could have possibly done this.

Atsushi recalled the serious, straightforward look in that person's eyes.

And that person was the time traveler H. G. Wells.



Atsushi dashed. The island had made an emergency announcement telling all guests to go inside, so Atsushi could run as quickly as his legs would take him without worrying about any tourists out and about. He was heading toward the clock tower in the center of the island. There should be an underground room in the woods that Wells had been using near the tower. The last time Atsushi was there was when he saw the camera's light and had his consciousness sent back in time, so he felt he might figure something out if he went.

Wells killed Virgo and the colonel and stole the weapon—Atsushi honestly didn't believe this hypothesis. There was no way it was her. She was distraught that her skill had been used to create a weapon of mass destruction, and she came to this island all by herself to prevent that from activating. Even sending Atsushi to the past was to stop the weapon from being activated, which he did. In other words, this situation wasn't what she desired.

Atsushi suddenly remembered something. *Last time* he went inside the underground room, they'd had to break the door's chain and pry it open. Wells had pulled out a military-grade knife and tried to break it herself. It had a rather large blade. It would have been a piece of cake to cut open someone's throat with that.

Did she really do it? Wells? I don't want to believe that her sense of justice was all part of some scheme.

But when he reached the pathway to the woods near the clock tower, he realized his wishes were far too optimistic. There was someone collapsed on the ground in a puddle of blood.

"Gab!"

He rushed over to the wounded teenager. Gab was holding his stomach. When Atsushi reached out to touch him, Gab slightly grimaced.

"Gab, what happened? Where's the boss?"

"I...failed..." Gab groaned feebly while clutching his abdomen. His face was pale. "The boss...is behind me..."

Atsushi looked behind him. Gab was collapsed on top of a small staircase on the path. Atsushi didn't notice at first, but there was about a three-foot drop-off behind Gab. At the bottom was the boss. His eyes were wide-open as he lay still like a stone statue. There was no light in his eyes. There was less blood around him than Gab, but fresh blood was still trickling weakly out of his neck. It was too late.

"No..."

The boss who used to be brimming with confidence... The individual who looked up to Arsène Lupin and wanted to become the next legendary phantom thief himself... The cheerful man who cared about his friends more than anything...

"Gab, what happened? Who did this to you?!"

Gab opened his mouth and tried to say something, but he could only gasp faintly. It was like the wind whistling through an opening. Gab's wound was fatal as well. His blood pressure had dropped due to the acute blood loss. It wouldn't be long before his life faded away.

"Don't die, Gab! I'll go call for help!"

"Hey... Matasaburo..." Gab's face twitched as he managed a smile. "You weren't...a thief after all..."

What was he talking about? Was the decrease in blood pressure cutting off oxygen to his brain and sending his consciousness elsewhere?

"No. I'm an agent at a detective agency," replied Atsushi. "I'll apologize and make it up to you as much as you want later! So please...! Stay with me!"

"Sorry, but...it doesn't look like that's gonna happen, Matasaburo..."

"My name isn't Matasaburo. It's Atsushi. Gab, I'm gonna go find you some help!"

"Atsushi...huh? Listen..." Gab reached out with a trembling hand. "My name...is...Gabri...el..."

His arm then lifelessly dropped into the puddle of blood. Unable to even blink, Atsushi watched the final moment of Gab's life. A gust of wind suddenly ran through the woods, causing the trees to rustle ominously.

Why? Why did Gab have to die? Why did the boss and Virgo have to die?

—"I'm the boss's number one disciple, so I'll just make you my number one disciple! You're the disciple of the Great Phantom Thief's disciple!"

The first time I came to this island, I thought it was so beautiful. I thought about how lucky I was to be able to spend time on such a wonderful resort even though it was for work. But I was wrong. This island is hell—a man-made hell that sails the ocean.

Atsushi checked the positional relation between Gab and the boss. Gab was on top of a hill in a pool of blood while the boss was at the bottom of the drop-off. The boss was surrounded in less blood. They must have both been attacked in the same area, but the boss fell. Atsushi looked up at the clock tower. It was 12:42.

All of a sudden, he noticed a familiar silhouette on the top floor of the tower. A woman with blond hair in a suit: Wells. There was no doubt about it. Before Atsushi could even process what was going on, he was already running.



Right as Atsushi was about to rush into the clock tower, he was stopped by a man standing in front of the entrance.

“Wait, Atsushi.”

It was Dazai. His eyes were extremely calm, unlike how they usually were.

“Dazai,” said Atsushi as he tried to catch his breath. “If we don’t hurry, the weapon—”

“Nothing good ever happens if you act before thinking during times like this,” claimed Dazai with a faint smirk. “What did you see?”

“The thieves...were killed,” groaned Atsushi. “All of them.”

“I see... This is what I found.” Dazai held up something black. “Do you know what this is?”

Dazai tossed it, and the rectangular mechanical object snapped in two when it hit the ground.

“I found it in one of the hotel rooms. It’s a microcomputer, or what’s left of one at least, after they doused it with oil and lit it on fire to completely destroy the evidence. I also found a bugging device, telescope, and pocket radio as well. All of which were burned, of course.”

A microcomputer? Destroying evidence?

“The fire alarm was smashed as well. They were dangerously close to starting a massive fire... The guest staying in the room apparently told the staff not to come inside under any circumstances. Don’t you find that a little strange?”

“Does that mean...?”

“How about this hypothesis? There were people who were sent to retrieve the weapon just like us. They underwent specialized training that taught them how to efficiently use cutting-edge technology and destroy evidence. However, their objective was not to prevent the weapon from activating and killing millions—it was to keep that powerful weapon for themselves.”

“What...?” Atsushi’s face turned pale. “What country’s

organization sent them...?”

“I can’t say for sure.” Dazai shrugged.

“But...why did they kill the thieves?”

“This is just speculation on my part, but...perhaps the engineer in their group uncovered some information online that he wasn’t supposed to know—information that would be dangerous for them to have.”

So Virgo was killed to silence him, and the boss and Gab were disposed of as well after they tried to get away...

The story made sense.

“We can’t let such a dangerous group of people get away with the weapon,” said Atsushi.

“Well, we first need to find out who they are. I mean, the Special Division for Unusual Powers gave us direct orders to do so as well.”

What should our next move be, then?

As if he could read Atsushi’s mind, Dazai raised his index finger and said:

“They already retrieved the weapon, which meant they had no reason to stay on the island any longer. They’re going to try to escape as quickly as they can, and if they are actually part of an organization, then someone’s probably going to come for them by boat or aircraft. I have a feeling it’s going to be by aircraft—something like an armed helicopter. While we may be the Armed Detective Agency, we wouldn’t be able to stand a chance against one of those barehanded. But if we can predict the direction they come in, we should be able to figure out who they are.”

Dazai pointed at the clock tower hanging overhead.

“As you know, this clock tower also serves as a flying bridge. If you use the radar detection equipment in the observation room on the top floor, you should be able to find incoming ships and aircrafts relatively quickly. However, the workers on the island are so busy with what happened with the colonel that they don’t have time to worry about incoming aircraft.”

Which means we have to be the ones to do it...

“By the way,” Atsushi added, having suddenly remembered, “I found Wells in the top floor’s observation room.”

“Now...what could the fabled skill user be doing in such an important place?” Dazai suggestively smirked. “How about we go ask them ourselves?”



Just like last time, Atsushi got off the elevator one floor before the top floor and took the staircase to his destination. He quietly ascended the

stairs, but he was still inwardly confused. Wells—*she* was a spy sent by an intelligence agency in some country? It was hard to believe. She said she created the weapon, so she came here herself to stop it. Atsushi didn't believe she was lying.

But thinking wasn't going to get him anywhere. Wells's time manipulation skill was incredible, but it wasn't meant for battle. In terms of strength alone, Atsushi's tiger skill had the advantage. He had no choice but to have Wells explain herself...even if that meant using force.

After climbing the stairs, Atsushi arrived at the top floor. He poked out his head and carefully surveyed the area. The observation room was no different from the last time he saw it. The walls were completely made of glass, giving a clear view of the great blue sea and vast blue sky.

He instantly found Wells. She was sitting in a round chair by the window she was looking out. Atsushi turned to Dazai and nodded. After that, they quietly began to approach her. Fortunately, she had her back turned to them. Atsushi had gotten rather used to moving without making a sound since he'd come to the island. He transformed his right arm into that of a tiger's, then pointed his claw at Wells's neck.

"Please don't move," pleaded Atsushi in a hushed tone. "A tiger's claws can cut through steel. No gun or sword will work against this arm."

Wells didn't answer.

"Wells, please tell me—were you the one who killed Gab? Did you kill Virgo and the boss and steal the weapon? Why?! Answer me!"

"Wait, Atsushi," said Dazai quietly as he entered the room. "Something's not right."

Wells slowly tilted to the side before collapsing to the ground with a thud. There was a dagger in her chest. Her clothes were stained with blood. She was dead.

"No..." Atsushi took a step back. "Why is she...? So she wasn't behind all of this...?"

"Atsushi, did that knife belong to her?"

Atsushi looked at the dagger's hilt. It was a military-grade knife—the same one she used when she tried to break the chain.

"Yes, it's hers."

"Strange...", admitted Dazai as he narrowed his eyes. "There's some oil on the hilt. It was probably the oil used to burn the computer. But...that doesn't make sense."

"What do you mean?"

"I'm talking about this facility. Nothing appears to be broken. The radar detection device, the telescope—everything is still in one piece,"

Dazai commented while checking the table and its nearby electrical equipment. “If I were the enemy, I wouldn’t just stab Wells and leave. As long as the equipment here is intact, every path of escape would be detectable: the sky, the surface of the ocean, and even in its waters. Did the enemy have no intention of escaping? More importantly, there is something fundamentally wrong... But that means...”

Dazai placed a hand on his chin and continued to mutter to himself in rumination. His eyes swiftly moved from left to right as if he were looking at something only he could see. Then, all of a sudden, he froze.

“Dazai?” said Atsushi.

Dazai slowly lifted his head, then vacantly said, “They got me.”

“Huh?”

“There was never any third power after the weapon.”

Atsushi saw something on Dazai’s face that he had never seen before: surprise.

“The burned computer was a fake as well. I’m impressed. They really thought this through. That means the culprit must still be—”

Dazai froze as if the rest of his sentence had been plucked clean off.

And the tip of a *blade* was now sticking out of his chest.



“Gw...ah...?”

Dazai tried to turn around, but whoever was behind him pushed the knife deeper inside him and twisted it. There was a crackling as if his bones were being pulled apart. Fresh blood spewed out of his mouth. Dazai tried to reach behind and grab the assailant but to no avail. With his arm stuck out, he turned slightly to the side before folding and crumpling to the ground.

Atsushi saw the entire thing happen. He saw every detailed movement, unable to blink. However, his brain was still incapable of processing what it all meant. The only one who understood what was happening wore a faint smirk as Dazai lay on the ground. *He* then pulled the knife out of Dazai’s back as it dripped with blood. After cleaning the blade off on his thigh, he looked at Atsushi and chuckled lightly.

“Phew. I was sweatin’ bullets for a second there. He was the biggest obstacle in our way, after all... Seemed like a good mentor just like you said. Eh, Matasaburo?”

Atsushi was trembling. He couldn’t stop sweating.

“...Gab?”



The man slowly circled around the observation room, his knife’s radiant blue-steel blade casually flickering as he moved.

“I lied to you. A lot,” admitted Gab in a flat voice. “But they weren’t all lies. Gab is my real name, and I was a member of a band of thieves. I became a member after the boss stepped onto the island, though.”

“What about when you said you really respected the boss?” asked Atsushi, his voice taut. “Did you really cut his throat and kill him?”

“I did. But only for the moment. I killed him *only for the time being*. I really do respect the guy. He gave me something important.”

Atsushi thought back to where Gab was killed: the pool of blood Gab was lying in and the drop-off behind him where the aspiring phantom thief was. He’d seen the boss’s slit throat, but no wounds on Gab’s stomach. *That was the boss’s blood*. After cutting the boss’s throat and creating a pool of blood, he lay in it himself, then pushed the corpse off the edge. That was why there wasn’t much blood around their head honcho.

“Move.” Atsushi’s voice was as tense as a drawn bowstring. “I’m

taking Dazai with me. Yosano should be able to heal him with her skill, wherever she is.”

Yosano was the detective agency’s physician with the extraordinary skill to heal wounds, even seemingly fatal ones, in an instant. Nevertheless, she couldn’t bring the dead back to life, so Atsushi had to hurry.

“Oh?” Gab raised an eyebrow. “You sure about that? When I looked into it, I learned that your mentor’s skill nullified all other skills... So wouldn’t touching him *nullify that person’s healing skill?*”

Large drops of sweat ran down Atsushi’s cheeks. Gab was right.

“Atsushi...,” Dazai mumbled feebly. “Don’t...try to...fight him... He’s a skill user—no, *he himself* is a skill...”

Dazai was the one who brought me into the detective agency. His ability to nullify other skills, while extraordinary, isn’t oriented toward fighting. He can’t handle being shot or stabbed like I can. I have to act fast, or else he’s gonna die.

“Gab.” Atsushi transformed both of his arms without even being aware that he was turning into a tiger himself. “I’m sorry, but I’m not going to hold back.”

“Same here.”

Atsushi leaped forward like a bullet, throwing his right fist toward Gab’s head...then suddenly stopped before throwing a right kick while his body was already turning from the punch. His tiger leg could have bent a steel pole, but Gab didn’t even blink. In fact, he didn’t even move. Instead, an arm emerged from the ground and blocked Atsushi’s kick.

“What?!”

It was a giant arm. Breaking the law of physics, the floor had taken the form of an arm like clay. It was taller than Gab, and its palm could snugly wrap around Atsushi in a fist. The giant hand easily blocked Atsushi’s hardest kick, not even leaving a single mark on its palm.

“That skill of yours never ceases to freak me out, Matasaburo.” Gab didn’t even flinch. “But, hey, it’s not as scary as what I can do.”

The stone arm suddenly extended toward Atsushi’s side. Without even a moment to dodge, the giant hand grabbed his body. The arm then stretched out and threw Atsushi into the glass behind him.

“Gwah...!”

The durable glass wall shattered on impact. An electric shock shot through Atsushi’s body as if he had just been hit by a car.

“You can’t beat me, Matasaburo,” sneered Gab with a wry smirk. “I’ve been protecting this island since before you even knew how to read and write.”

“What...?”

Atsushi looked at Gab. Gab was clearly younger than him, and this island was created over fourteen years ago. He would've been an infant then.

"You don't seem convinced," said Gab. "But I'm not here to convince you of anything. Good-bye, Matasaburo."

"Gab," began Atsushi as the giant hand held his body. "Just who are you...?"

Gab didn't say a word. But when he wagged his index finger, the floor under him immediately began to transform. He sank. It was as if his legs were being swallowed by quicksand.

"I am the island itself. But I'm not here to protect the people on it. In fact, I don't plan on ever protecting them, no matter how hard they pray to me." He chuckled as he sank into the ground. "Later. I'm gonna go have some fun with the weapon. 'Bout time I changed the scenery around here."

— "*Legend has it that its power can freely change the shape of the island and has been protecting it from foreign enemies all these years.*"

Atsushi remembered what the captain told him.

"Wait... Are you...?"

Gab continued to submerge into the floor. It must have been the same skill he used to create the arm. The floor rippled as Gab's waist, then shoulders continued to sink.

The legendary guardian of the island...who has been one with the island ever since it was created...

"You're the island's guardian?"

"Yes and no," Gab replied with a smile, neck-deep in the floor. "I am Jules Gabriel Verne, the guardian and the destroyer. My skill is known as *The Mysterious Island*... Good-bye, Matasaburo."

Gab's head then sank into the floor, and he disappeared.



Dazai continued to hemorrhage blood. Anyone could see that his wound was fatal. A broad blade had pierced his chest, severing numerous vital arteries. It wasn't an amount of bleeding that could simply be stopped by applying pressure to the wound. When the body rapidly lost blood, peripheral blood circulation stopped due to the decrease in blood pressure. Furthermore, it could lead to a disturbance in metabolism in vital organs. The first symptoms were paleness and a rapid heartbeat due to the stress on the sympathetic nervous system, along with ischemic acidosis in peripheral tissue. However, the biggest issue was the reduction of cardiac contractility due to myocardial ischemia. In other words, the stopping of the heart—hemorrhagic shock.

“Dazai!”

Atsushi rushed over to Dazai after managing to break his arm free from the stone hand. Dazai was trying to say something. He opened his mouth while turning to Atsushi with his pale face and moved his lips, but he couldn't make a sound. His voice didn't even have the energy to make it to his throat. It was gone. Dazai moved his lips, and Atsushi tried to read them.

“It's *finally* happening.” Dazai smiled. “It's nowhere near as big of a deal as I thought it'd be.”

Atsushi couldn't take his eyes off Dazai's lips as they continued to move.

“Good-bye, Atsushi.”

Atsushi's head grew hot with rage.

Death.

Unavoidable death.

Atsushi quickly pulled out his phone and called Kunikida.

“Kunikida! Bring Yosano to the clock tower immediately! Dazai's been stabbed, and his pulse is dropping!”

“*What?!*” Kunikida's voice and the noise of what sounded like a fierce battle could be heard on the other end of the call. “*Damn it! Just when I thought things couldn't get worse!*”

Something wasn't right. The violent noise of battle... The sound of gunfire... Buildings roaring as they shook...

“*A bunch of arms just emerged from the ground and began attacking! The other detectives and I are keeping them at bay, but we've already got our hands full protecting the tourists!*”

What...? But then Dazai's...!

Dazai was slumped on the floor with his eyes closed. He was smiling like a child on Sunday. He looked as if he could hop up at any moment and yell, “Just kidding!” But his wrist didn't have a pulse. He wasn't breathing, either.

“Kunikida,” Atsushi said while placing a finger on Dazai's chest. “His heart stopped.”

“*I see... Atsushi,*” Kunikida said as if he was struggling to suppress something. “*You know the procedure, right?*”

“I do.”

A healing skill wouldn't work on Dazai due to his skill. That was an unchanging fact. But at the same time, there *was* a way to heal Dazai using a skill.

“*The problem is these attacks,*” grumbled Kunikida. “*Even if I headed to the clock tower while dodging them all, there still isn't enough time. Atsushi, you know who the skill user behind this is, right?*”

“Yes,” answered Atsushi.

“*Defeat them,*” Kunikida concisely ordered. “*As quickly as you can.*”

There's no other way. Whoever they are, they probably have the weapon. Defeat whoever's really behind this so that there won't be any more victims."

Defeat Gab.

Atsushi clenched his fist. He wanted to save Dazai. He would do anything to save him, but there were so many issues at hand. The most prominent being...

"There's no time," Atsushi growled as if he were going to cough up blood. "I have to resuscitate him within the next two minutes, but I'm not powerful enough to get past the enemy's skill. At this rate—"

Out of nowhere, somebody grabbed Atsushi by the shoulder from behind.

"I wouldn't be so sure of that. I have an idea."

It was Wells.



"Wells..."

Atsushi vacantly stared at her. Wells had been stabbed in the chest. She was clearly dead. The camera hanging from her neck faintly shone.

"Sorry, but I can't walk on my own with this wound. I have an underground base nearby—take me there. I created a room to defend against the Shell. Even with his skill, he won't be able to reach us easily in there."

"But..."

Atsushi hesitated. Each second was a grain of sand in the hourglass of Dazai's life as it faded away. There wasn't a moment to spare.

"I can extend that man's life around twenty minutes using the same method I used on myself. So take me. Please," pleaded Wells as she looked into Atsushi's eyes. "I don't want anyone else to die because of me."

Those words were what moved Atsushi. He helped Wells up and began to walk.

It wasn't easy carrying both Dazai and Wells. While carrying two adults with Atsushi's tiger arms and legs wasn't so much of a problem, both of them were taller than Atsushi, so he ended up having to drag their feet behind him.

"My skill allows me to send people's consciousnesses into the past just once, but it can also manipulate the flow of time in the area to a certain extent," Wells said hoarsely as Atsushi carried her. "That's how

I slowed down my bleeding. I should be able to do the same for that man, Dazai, as well.”

Atsushi thought back to the underground room when he was there last time. The room had been cool despite the fiery winds destroying and scorching everything on the surface. Wells had been able to manage this by slowing down time in the room.

“But...Dazai’s body nullifies all skills, so I don’t know if you can manipulate the flow of time for him.”

“I’ve seen plenty of skill battles in my day,” Wells explained. “I’ve got a good idea how these things work. Skills that nullify other skills *will not* activate if the user is dead. In other words, Dazai—or rather, his body—won’t be nullifying any skills, since his heart has stopped. Therefore, I should be able to slow down his flow of time.”

She was right. Before doing any kind of work at the detective agency, the president always made sure everyone knew what each skill would do in any given circumstance. It was rare for a skill to continue even after death. Atsushi’s, Kunikida’s, and even Dazai’s skill would disappear the moment they died.

“And the only way you can resuscitate him is based on that very same principle,” Wells added as she looked at Atsushi. “Right?”

Atsushi silently nodded back.

What to do to bring back the suicidal romantic when he actually died had been considered in-depth with a focus on Kunikida. The optimal method had been beaten into Atsushi’s head as well. Essentially, the method was decided as follows:

First, when Dazai’s heart came to a stop, the blood supply to the brain would cease, and Dazai would die. When this happened, his skill would cease to exist, and other skills would start working on him again. Therefore, his wounds needed to be swiftly treated, and he’d need immediate resuscitation afterward—even the kind of resuscitation they perform at any ordinary hospital such as using a defibrillator to start up Dazai’s heart through electric stimulation. And if that worked, Dazai would go from being “dead” to being “on the brink of death.”

After that, Yosano could use her skill to completely heal his wounds. In other words, it should be possible to heal Dazai as long as he was on the brink of death. However, Dazai’s nullification skill would still try to get in the way, and if Yosano’s skill didn’t work, there would be no way to treat him, since there were no medical devices or any equipment to do a blood transfusion on hand. If that were to happen, then resuscitating Dazai would have been all for naught.

Nevertheless, there was a small margin of opportunity right before the skills would clash. After Dazai was resuscitated and his heart

started moving again, there would be a brief window until the blood reached his brain. Since his heart would be beating, this would mean he was on the brink of death, which meant Yosano's skill would work, and at the same time, Dazai's brain wouldn't be functioning, so his skill wouldn't get in the way, either. This was a 0.5-second window of opportunity.

It was the difference between life and death, and the only method to use a skill on Dazai to heal him. There were no other options.

There were simply too many conditions that had to be met. Would they be able to treat his wounds? Would electrical stimulation start his heart back up? Would the ischemic interval after his heart stopped be short enough that his vital organs wouldn't necrotize? The odds of it succeeding were low, but they weren't zero. In addition, the less time that passed after Dazai's death, the greater the rate of success would be with this resuscitation method.

Originally, the suicide fanatic Dazai hated this method. He even demanded that nobody use it. But...

"This strategy has a time limit," Wells said with a soft sigh. "I'll wait underground with Dazai, but even in this room where time flows more slowly, our wounds will most likely be beyond treatment after twenty minutes go by. Therefore, your mission is to defeat the guardian and bring the healer here before that happens. Everyone's lives rest on your shoulders."

"There's no way around it," growled Atsushi.

"Think you can do it?"

"I have to, or Dazai's gonna die," stated Atsushi as he glared at a point in space. "Of course I can do it."



Gab was walking along the cobblestone path. He gazed at the island looking as if he wanted to start humming a song. There was no one in sight. The stone arms that had emerged from the ground had created utter chaos among the island visitors. The areas everyone evacuated to were also part of the island—part of Gab. There was nowhere to run. Numerous people had fled to the wharf to escape, but the stone arms were keeping all ships from moving. But to Gab, their confusion and screams were nothing more than symbols that gave shape to the situation.

Gab's goal was not to destroy and murder. Those were just means to an end. However, if those were shortcuts to his own conservation and tranquility, then he wouldn't even hesitate to act in these heinous ways.

Everything was going to cease to exist in the end, after all.

Gab walked with Annihilation in hand. It was the real briefcase, which he stole from the fifth basement floor. With his skill, sneaking into the secret zone underground and pilfering a hidden weapon would have been a piece of a cake. The key was having the Armed Detective Agency steal it. That was why he schemed, deceived, and played the fool.

But that was part of Gab's true nature as well. He was a timid thief. He was ill-mannered and quick to lose his temper, and he respected the boss from the bottom of his heart. Even if everything were to revert back to normal, having slit the boss's throat would still genuinely pain Gab.

But every sacrifice was for a cause. All that was left was to let the situation play out and wait for both Dazai and Wells to die. There was no rush. A leisurely ten-minute walk should suffice. Whatever the case, there was nothing they could do to change the inevitable.

Gab suddenly looked up to find a black shadow standing before him. The shadow was simply stopped in the middle of the cobblestone path, unfazed by the turmoil around him. Everything about him was like that of a shadow. Only his piercing gaze was white. His black overcoat fluttered in the dusty wind.

"How strange," hissed the shadow. "After the man-tiger got away, I returned to the surface only to find someone else with the weapon."

A few moments went by before Gab realized the shadow was talking to him.

"Oh, this?" He held up the briefcase. "Yeah, I kinda need it. Besides, it'd be a real mess if some random guy got a peek at it."

"I see." The shadow—Akutagawa—faintly moved. "It appears you stole that from the man-tiger. I was hoping I could steal the weapon and kill him at the same time to save myself some trouble...but perhaps overindulgence is never a good thing."

Akutagawa's overcoat grew as something began to writhe on its surface.

"Your skill's pretty scary, too, huh?" Gab gave him a slight smirk. "So what're you planning on doing?"

"Isn't it obvious?" said Akutagawa. "I plan on completing my objectives in order. First, I will take care of the prey in front of me."

Akutagawa's overcoat tore open, unleashing two black blades.

"Whoa. Now *that's* scary."

As Gab raised his hand into the air, two soil-colored arms emerged from the ground and got into position to protect their master. The blades immediately pierced the arms, but they suddenly stopped before even getting deeper than the tips of their fingernails.

"Believe it or not, my skill's got a good track record when it comes to defense. Hate to break it to ya, but—"

“Defense?” Akutagawa tilted his head. “Those clods of dirt? I thought this was some new way to shake hands, so I stopped my attack.”

The blades transformed. The tips of the spears writhed until they morphed into the jaws of a beast. The two dark beasts then devoured the stone arms from the wrists up.

“What?!”

“*Rashomon: Agito*. That mud is far too meager to satisfy their hunger.”

After breaking through Gab’s defense, the shadowy beasts latched on to Gab’s body from both sides. For demons that could devour even space itself, tearing into tender human flesh would be effortless. Akutagawa visualized his opponent being ripped apart from each side, cleanly splitting him into three different parts. That was what was supposed to happen.

However...

“Man, it’s even creepier up close. You ever make kids cry with these things?” said Gab with a lighthearted laugh.

The beasts had sunk their teeth into Gab’s flesh, and yet, it was as if nothing had happened. Their teeth went right through him as if Gab were nothing more than a mirage.

“What...?”

Akutagawa’s eyes opened wide. It didn’t seem as if Gab had done anything, and the dark beasts hadn’t moved any differently than they usually did. And yet, they didn’t even hurt Gab, let alone touch him. The shadow beasts returned once more and tried to lop off Gab’s head, but their fangs simply passed through his body. It was as if they were attacking fog or mist.

Was his skill to evade?

But Gab already showed that his skill could create arms out of stone. It was hard to believe he would have another one. Even if he did happen to have another skill, what exactly was it? It was as if the skill allowed Akutagawa’s fine, black blades to slip cleanly *through* his body without any interference.

“Now it’s my turn.”

As Gab raised an arm into the air, Akutagawa’s feet immediately began to sink into the cobblestones. As if it had turned into mud, the ground swallowed Akutagawa’s heels, then ankles.

“Hmph... The ability to manipulate the ground?”

“It’s technically different, but I guess we’ll go with that. Not like it’ll matter once you’re dead, after all.”

As Akutagawa continued to sink into the ground, unable to move, stone arms began to emerge around him one by one. Ten—twenty—countless arms surrounded him as if he were in a forest of arms.

“Tch...”

The giant hands slowly closed in as Akutagawa remained unable to dodge or attack Gab until the sound of crushing and grinding echoed across the street.



Atsushi laid Dazai and Wells down in the underground room in the woods. Wells was so weakened that she couldn't stand, but even then, she used her camera-shaped skill item to temporarily manipulate the room's flow of time. Just like last time, a pale light filled the space, cutting off the area from the outside world, and thus somewhat prolonging what remained of Dazai's and Wells's lives.

But just as how they weren't able to protect themselves from the Shell last time, they wouldn't be able to delay Dazai's bleeding forever, either. Wells's skill device—the camera-shaped time machine—didn't have enough energy built in to do so. It would only be able to extend time at a maximum of twenty minutes. Twenty minutes from now—when the clock struck 1:14 PM—it would be too late to save Dazai and Wells.

Before that happened, Atsushi had to defeat Gab, curb the panic on the island, and bring Yosano to Dazai.

Who was Gab? What was he trying to accomplish? The list of questions just went on. Nevertheless, now was not the time to worry about the nonessentials. All Atsushi had to focus on was defeating Gab and removing all the obstacles in his way.

Finding Gab was easy. After all, Atsushi could see the fine particles from battle rise into the air. The rumbling ground, the sound of something heavy like a pillar being sliced in half—there weren't many skill users even on this island who could create such chaos. Atsushi sprinted in the direction of the noise.

The war zone looked like a storm had swept through, tearing down everything in its path. Brick buildings were being split in half and collapsing. Old-fashioned windmills were bursting from their foundations and flying into the air. Gravel and lumps of soil scattered about as holes were opening in the ground. Half-cut stone pillars dotted the area as if they were the tombstones of war. The severed stone pillars were what was left of Gab's stone arms after the hands had been sliced off, and they stopped moving. The skill user cutting the arms in half was...

“Man, I'm impressed. It's like you've got eyes in the back of your head.”

“Did you really think you could stop me simply by burying my legs in the ground? It’s not even worth dodging your pathetic attacks. I shall cut every last one of them down.”

Robed in a black storm and relentlessly cutting down the stone arms was Akutagawa. Gab, on the other hand, was sitting in a rocking chair amid the ruins, leisurely watching the battle. Akutagawa gradually sank. The ground slowly swallowed his body like quicksand, leaving him unable to move or evade. But even then, Akutagawa continued to calmly strike back. Stone arms and black fabric clashed around him, slicing and smashing everything that got in their way. No human would be able to survive being in that space.

“Just wait your turn, Matasaburo. I’ll be done with this gloomy fella soon.”

Perched in the rocking chair, Gab turned only his gaze in Atsushi’s direction.

He noticed me.

Gab’s remark caused Akutagawa to look over at Atsushi as well.

“Man-Tiger! You—”

“Oh, hey. Thanks for looking the other way.”

Three arms emerged from the ground by Akutagawa, spiraling around him. There was nowhere to run or hide.

“Too slow.” Akutagawa spun his overcoat like an umbrella, slicing the arms in half. However, the severed hands immediately returned to their arms like liquid returning to its source.

“I forgot to mention it, but those arms were specially made.”

“Tch. Regenerating arms.”

Five colossal fingers closed in on Akutagawa. With no way to escape, his shoulders, waist, and legs were grabbed by each hand as they squeezed him with enough force to shatter a boulder.

“Gwah...!”

His bones snapped as blood spewed out of the areas being squeezed. Using countless black blades, he managed to slice one of the stone arms into pieces until it was nothing more than fine powder, but he soon dropped to his knees, unable to bear the pain any longer.

Damn it! Not even Akutagawa can beat him?

Atsushi changed the direction he was facing. Fighting Gab head-on would be too reckless. He had to create an opening, dodge his way through the attacks, and find Yosano.

“Not so fast, Matasaburo. You’re gonna miss out on all the fun.” Gab looked over at Atsushi and smiled. “It’s not often you get to be in the dead center of a great catastrophe. Take in the view and enjoy yourself a little more.”

The ground vertically shook. The island vibrated. Everything began to tremble as if it had gone into convulsions. Unable to keep his

knees straight, Atsushi instinctively placed both hands on the ground. He suddenly heard a tremendous sound as if a boulder had crashed into the ground behind him, so he turned around. It was a wall. A wall was protruding onto the path he'd come from. The wall was made out of boulder, soil, and trees—some steel beams from the island's base were mixed in, too. Even its height was extraordinary. The wall slowly grew before him as if he were watching the earth's crust move, until it was over sixty-six feet tall. The ground continued to convulse the entire time as if the island were on the brink of death. It wasn't only one wall, either. Three long, massive walls emerged in a radial pattern as if to divide the island into three parts: England, Germany, and France.

"What the...? What's going on?!"

Was this a skill? But how? This went beyond far beyond the realm of what a skill could do.

"Who needs builders and contractors when you've got me, right?" Gab smirked from his rocking chair. "How about trying to climb it to save your friends? Just to let you know, it's gonna be a lot harder than it looks."

He immediately knew what Gab was trying to do. Atsushi wouldn't be able to get to Yosano like this. While he would be able to climb up a sixty-six-foot-long wall alone if he used his claws, he would be completely defenseless along the way. Atsushi would have no chance to defend himself if one of those stone arms attacked him. Even if he made it over, it would be impossible to bring Yosano back over the wall with him.

"So what're you gonna do?"

"Not like I have much of a choice," Atsushi said, staring at Gab. "If anything, it's become extremely clear what I need to do. The only way to save Dazai is to defeat you."

"I knew you'd say that." Gab smiled. "That was awesome when you choked that guard out. You may not realize it, but you're actually a pretty violent guy."

"Wait," demanded a deep voice that shook the air. It was Akutagawa. "What did you just say, Man-Tiger? 'Save Dazai?'"

"It's none of your business."

"Man-Tiger." Akutagawa's overcoat fluttered as if it were reacting to its master's bloodlust. "Do you want to die first?"

Sitting on his knees, Akutagawa formed a black blade out of his overcoat. The blade soared through the air, but right as it was about to pierce its prey, Atsushi effortlessly turned his head to the side and dodged it.

"I already know all your attacks. I've seen enough," said Atsushi as he glared at Akutagawa. "So don't get in my way. I have to defeat

him.”

“You—!”

“Hey, c’mon,” Gab chimed in, sounding fed up. “Why do I gotta be the third wheel? Are you friends or something? You guys seem to get along quite well.”

“Yeah, right.”

“Absurd.”

Atsushi and Akutagawa responded at the same time.

“Sigh... Fine.” Gab shrugged. “Looks like I’ll just have to fight both of you at once.”

Immediately, countless stone arms closed in on Atsushi and Akutagawa. Atsushi promptly reacted, leaping over the first giant fist that soared by before landing on the next arm attacking from the flank. He then jumped back into the air, dodging countless arms as they rose from the ground like snakes.

“You truly are amazing, Matasaburo.” Gab smirked. “I think I *want that skill of yours* now. Let’s see how you handle this.”

Out of nowhere, something hit Atsushi right in the stomach. The powerful blow bent Atsushi in half, making his organs feel as if they were on fire. All Atsushi could see was red. What hit him in the stomach was a finger—the index finger of one of the giant stone hands. When Atsushi looked down, he saw a hole in the ground around the same size with smoke billowing out of it as if something had been fired.

He shot a warhead in the shape of a finger out of the ground?!

“I hope you’re ready for more.”

Countless holes appeared in the earth. A hundred cannons then pointed to the sky before firing a hundred cannonballs at Atsushi. Their speed was about the same as a normal cannonball. Atsushi opened his tiger eyes wide in an attempt to dodge the attacks, but there were simply too many of them. One lightly hit him on the shoulder, forcing his body to twist and allowing another cannonball to hit him right in the temple.

“Gwah...!”

The impact knocked him unconscious. His head violently rattled, and the bones in his neck wailed. After losing consciousness, the cannonballs relentlessly pummeled his body one after another. Like a leaf being pelted by heavy rain, Atsushi’s body fluttered in the air. He couldn’t control his body. He had no idea how many bones were broken or how many organs were crushed. Only the vague presence of death coldly wrapped itself around his consciousness.

Atsushi continued to fall to the ground. He was going to crash. Or at least he thought he was. Instead, he heard a splat before realizing his body was being sucked into the hard soil. Ripples appeared on the

surface as it swallowed Atsushi like a bottomless swamp. First his back, then his torso and neck sank into the abyss. Out of the corner of his eye, Atsushi barely saw a black piece of fabric shoot through the air as if to save him; only his head remained free. But before he could even be sure, his entire body sank into the island and disappeared.



Atsushi had a dream about someone.

He couldn't tell which way was up or down. He didn't know whether he was sitting or standing, whether he was hot or cold. Even the difference between one second from now and one hour from now was ambiguous.

Atsushi was having a dream about a boy he didn't know. He was a kind boy with a lonely hue to his firm gaze as he quietly stared at the island alone. There were no tourist attractions. No windmills. Nothing. It was an untouched island with absolutely nothing but an empty landscape. In the middle of the island stood the boy.

Atsushi didn't know what this dream was about or who the boy was, but for some reason, he knew the boy was lonely.

As he gazed at the sky and sea, he had the same light in his eyes as Atsushi. In the depths of his clear eyes was conviction—conviction that the world didn't exist to be nice to him—conviction that hell was in the hearts of others.

The boy was the guardian of the island. He was lonely, noble-minded, and he didn't even love himself. There was nobody by his side. His eyes were only fixed on what he had to do, and depressingly so. Atsushi tried to call out to the boy, but he couldn't make a sound. When he tried to approach the boy, he moved farther away, and when he tried to look directly at the boy, he couldn't clearly see him. Only loneliness painfully chilled his heart like a piece of ice sliding down the back of his throat.

“Wake up, young tiger.”

Atsushi opened his eyes to the sound of the voice.

I'm lying down somewhere—somewhere dark. I'm not dead. I'm alive.

“Are you conscious? Can you hear my voice?”

Atsushi looked around. It was a narrow, round cavern. The air itself was emitting a faint light, vaguely outlining the space. It didn't appear to be a dream or the afterlife, but then...where was this?

“We're in an underground cavern on the island,” said the voice as if they could read Atsushi's mind. Nevertheless, he still couldn't see where the voice was coming from.

“This cavern was all I could create using my remaining power, and it, too, will soon disappear.”

The air faintly emitted more light as it began to show the silhouette of a person. It was a tall, young man. He was perhaps slightly older than Atsushi. While he didn't know the person, Atsushi felt as if he had met him somewhere before.

Who are you?

“I am Verne,” replied the man after reading Atsushi's mind once more. “I am the guardian of this island and one of the Seven Traitors, Jules Gabriel Verne.”

Gab?

But that couldn't be. He was far older than Gab. The young man dimly appearing before Atsushi could have been twice Gab's age. His demeanor and voice were different as well. Unlike the short-tempered, ill-mannered Gab, this young man seemed like a quiet individual who'd enjoy working at a library.

Nevertheless, the color of his hair and eyes were the same. He appeared to somewhat share Gab's meticulous, shrewd aura as well.

“First, just so there is no confusion, you won't be able to leave this place,” Verne—Gab's older self—clearly stated. “As long as *he* intends to keep you here, at least—for you are now inside him. I am deeply sorry, but I do not possess the power to save you.”

“He”? Is he talking about Gab? But I thought you were Gab, too...?

“Yes and no,” replied the young man in the same manner Gab did. “*He* is not human.”

Then what is he?

“A skill,” stated the young man. “Have you ever thought about what skills are?”

“What skills are”? Of course I have. There hasn't been a day since I learned who the white tiger actually was that I haven't thought about skills. What was that tiger? Why did I have the power of one? How much of me is me, and how much of the tiger is me? Why did people have to suffer because of my skill?

“I have something I want to show you,” said Verne. “I want to show you his—the island's—memories. There aren't many who know, and there are even fewer who speak of it, but it is something you must see, young tiger. Thanks to your friend—the man who can nullify skills—I was able to be here, although only temporarily. I believe you wish to save him, yes?”

Of course. No matter what it costs.

“Then watch the rest of the dream.”

The glowing light grew brighter. Atsushi once again thought to himself:

Is this part of reality? Or am I simply hallucinating, deprived of oxygen

and on the verge of death underground?

“You will have to be the judge of whether this is a hallucination, just like everything in this world,” replied Verne from within the light. Atsushi could no longer see him. The quality of the air around him changed as well. The world blurred as Atsushi soon became unable to perceive what was outside and what was inside. Grieving as if he were being sent far, far away, Atsushi sank into another world—into a sea of information.



Jules Gabriel Verne was a quiet, timid boy. After losing his parents to the war, Verne shut himself off from the world. A cold loneliness was all he had, and he held no expectations in life. But when Verne was fourteen years old, he hit a turning point when a certain organization discovered his skill and took him in.

The Seven Traitors.

That was what they once called the criminals who ended the war among nations. They were seven individuals, each from a different country and of a different race. What they had in common, though, were their extraordinary skills and a firm resolution to end the war, regardless of how dirty their hands got—even if it meant ignoring all principles and morals.

Verne became one of the Seven. Jules Gabriel Verne—his skill was called *The Mysterious Island*. It was an extremely rare skill. Its range extended across the island he claimed as his domain, and it *absorbed* all the skills of the people who died there. Everyone thought Verne decided to fight to end the war that killed his parents, but that wasn't the case. He genuinely just wanted to do something for the Seven. That was the turning point in his life. He finally had people like him—people who took him in and changed him—fellow criminals he could trust his life with—just like how Atsushi had the detective agency.

During that time, the Seven Traitors—including Verne—carried out their largest mission yet. They held a peace conference on the man-made island of Standard Island. They kidnapped the highest decision-making bodies of each country and brought them to this island to force peace among the overexhausted nations who had no plans of ever ending the war, despite the fact that the countries were already impoverished and incapable of continuing the fight.

Each of the Seven utilized their skill to kidnap the most prominent ruling and military leaders of each nation, then locked them inside the island's secret zone. They persuaded, threatened, and in some cases almost brainwashed the leaders with their skills to get them to agree to peace. Once that was over, they kidnapped anyone who might have

affected the continuation of the war, such as key members involved with public relations in each country and executives in munitions industries, then made them do the same thing.

During that time, countless armies and intelligence agencies smuggled themselves onto the island and tried to steal their men back, but they were no match for Verne's skill. While it only worked on the island, he was essentially invincible against anyone who came. Verne defeated numerous special forces and assassins with skills, only to absorb their skills and become even stronger.

As a result, the signed treaty for peace became valid, aided by strong demand from the anti-war protestors, and thus ended the battle.

And just like that, Verne was alone once again. Some of the Seven Traitors died, while others disappeared, but Verne stayed on the island alone. The key countries needed a facility for negotiations and to communicate in secret, regardless of how tense international affairs became. Therefore, he decided to remain on the island. (The conference room on the fourth basement floor with the large screens and telephones that Atsushi saw was created for said purpose as well.)

Verne was alone, but he didn't even attempt to abandon his duty to protect the island. He needed a place for his friends to return. He had to protect Standard Island—which was protected from the rest of the world—for when he was reunited with the other Seven Traitors. And just like that, Verne became the guardian.

Fourteen years peacefully went by with only a little trouble along the way. Eventually, the boy at the end of the war had become a young man and continued to put his energy into maintaining the island while living on it as one of the workers. However, peace is nothing more than a short break between wars. One day after those fourteen years had passed, a foreign object was brought onto the island unlike anything before:

Annihilation—the Shell. And not long after came the skill user who could manipulate time, Wells.

Verne, who took this matter seriously, immediately made a move. He took the name Gab, a tourist on the island, and made contact with Wells to see who she really was. After determining she was worthy enough to cooperate with, he promised to help her get the weapon back from the terrorist.

It wasn't hard for the guardian of the island to discover where the weapon was hidden. The hard part was retrieving it. The terrorist—the colonel—was always surrounded by fully armed soldiers, but Gab couldn't show them Verne's skill, for it had strong ties to serious crimes during the war. Gab couldn't let outsiders know of it, and he was far too kind to kill the colonel's men.

Therefore, he devised a plan where he would use the thieves who had sneaked onto the island long before. They weren't big shots. In fact, they failed every time. Then they would escape prison and try it all over again. However, the boss's skill—the ability to walk through walls—was perfect for hiding and emerging anywhere on the island. Verne used a skill he absorbed long ago that allowed him to manipulate age and appearance to transform into a young teenager. Then, when he asked the thief if he could become his pupil, he was almost immediately welcomed into the group.

While borrowing the boss's skill with the appearance of a boy, Verne easily reached the weapon and defeated the colonel. He was able to retrieve the weapon, but that was when the unexpected happened: Wells was hit by a stray bullet and died. She was a powerful skill user, but her abilities were not suited for battle. Being hit with a bullet meant death. Verne was devastated. Despite acting as the island's guardian these past fourteen years, he couldn't even save the life of a single woman. Fortunately, though, he soon thought of a way to rescue her.

Verne would absorb her skill once she died on the island, send himself fifty-five minutes into the past, and save her. The plan worked. Verne returned fifty-five minutes into the past and was reunited with Wells. He fought against the colonel and won once again. But that was when Verne realized something. If he were to absorb Wells's skill again, couldn't he return to the past again too?

Wells's skill wouldn't allow the same person to return to the past more than once, but if Verne used his skill to keep stealing hers, he would always be using the skill for the first time. In other words, he could ignore the skill's condition that would only allow him to travel once into the past. Even though he prevented the weapon from being activated, soldiers still died, and he defeated the colonel without even learning of his motives. If he went back fifty-five minutes—if he kept going back fifty-five minutes in time—he would be able to create the best future. That was what he believed.

To make a long story short, his hypothesis was correct. Verne was able to countlessly go back in time and steal the weapon. Ten times. Twenty times. But every time, somebody got hurt, whether it be the captain, the soldiers, or even one of the thieves. Creating a perfect world was far more difficult than Verne had imagined. In addition, every time he succeeded, he thought, *What if...?* It was never enough for him; he always wanted more.

But during those trials, he realized something he never expected would happen.

The time was gradually getting longer. At first it was fifty-five minutes. Then it was fifty-six. Soon enough, he could travel fifty-eight

minutes into the past, and eventually even hours. Skills had been occasionally observed to evolve as the user mastered them, but Verne never expected his to evolve like this. To be honest, it was a thrilling miscalculation to make. He could redo more the further he went back in time and save more people. Verne went back hours in time—days, even, until he began to harbor hope. If he kept going further back in time, would he be able to be reunited with his friends? If he went even further back, would he be able to stop the *war itself* from ever happening?

It was a big dream—far too big for a single human. It never dawned on Verne that as the skill increased in power, something else was slowly building up as well, and it wasn't necessarily something good. Skills themselves were neither good nor evil. They simply existed. And at times, skills led to results far more sinister than anyone's ill intentions.

There was no way to name what was building up. Some may say it was something similar to experience points, while others may say it was something close to error. While traveling into the past, the skill got stronger, transformed, and eventually grew to have a will of its own.

It was just like Atsushi's tiger skill. Even if Atsushi borrowed a portion of the tiger's strength, he was not able to control the tiger itself. If Atsushi were to fully transform into the white tiger, he would wreak havoc, acting on instinct. He wouldn't even be able to predict who he would hurt or what he would destroy. That was what made it powerful and infallible without intention.

That was the island in Gab's case; and in Verne's case, that was how much more powerful the island was. The island's skill rid itself of Verne's personality and robbed him of his flesh. That was when the living skill Gab was born. The consciousnesses of the skill Gab and the possessor Verne reversed. However, Gab's consciousness was less stable compared with humans. Even Atsushi's white tiger could only be expressed for a short period of time. If Verne stopped returning to the past and if time began to flow normally once again, he would soon cease to exist. The skill—Gab—was terrified. He didn't want to disappear. It was unbearable to him to simply imagine that he wouldn't exist—that he would sink into the darkness of the unknown.

Gab, the new life-form, decided to do the same thing as his master. In other words, he was going to repeat time. He would continue living inside the loop, never to go outside. Gab would never lose who he was as long as the future never came. By then, he was able to go thirty hours back in time. Through preventing the future from coming and shutting himself within those thirty hours, he was able to avoid the fear of death.

On the surface, he continued to live in a loop just like Verne. He would go back into the past, steal the weapon, and return back into the past. What made him different from Verne was his reason. The guardian of the island, Verne, wanted to save everyone. Gab, on the other hand, didn't care whether people died.

He repeated the past over and over again, gaining knowledge and wisdom each time along with becoming more clever and cunning as well. That was enough for Gab. He was happy. He just wanted to live, nothing else.

But while repeating the past thousands—hundreds of thousands—of times, sometimes a rare, unforeseen circumstance arose. A small miscalculation would greatly change the future. One time, the colonel committed suicide. Another time, Wells saw through Gab's scheme. With each past, Gab would use the knowledge he had gained to deal with the situation and overcome the irregular circumstances. Then he would kill Wells once more in the end and return to the past—that is, until he made his greatest miscalculation.

Like most things, it started as a small difference. Worried about rumors of a weapon, the captain leaked the information to an outsider, and that rumor ended up reaching the Special Division for Unusual Powers—a secret department of the Japanese government that managed skill users. Since the island was within the territory of Japan, the Division immediately took action and sent the Armed Detective Agency to the island.

Gab's natural enemy—Dazai—worked at the detective agency. Dazai nullified all skills he touched. Gab's core was deep below the island, so there was no reason for him to worry about disappearing if Dazai merely touched the island. However, if Dazai was to touch his flesh, he would cease to exist. In addition, during the initial moment when Gab used his skill to steal the skills of all those who died on the island, the effects spread across the entire island. Therefore, if Dazai was on the island at that exact moment, his skill would cause Gab to cease to exist. In other words, he wouldn't be able to steal Wells's skill from her body and continue the loop as long as Dazai was on the island.

For Gab, the threat of Dazai's skill was equivalent to having a knife shoved into his throat. There was only one way to remove the threat—kill Dazai so that his skill wouldn't activate. But after checking outside information records, Gab knew that Dazai was frighteningly sharp. He had solved countless cases ever since he joined the detective agency. Gab grew even more concerned after actually witnessing Dazai's cunning, which steadily brought him closer to the weapon. It wasn't going to be easy. In addition, the guardian's powerful defense wouldn't work against Dazai. It was far too

dangerous to fight him head-on. Gab needed a smoke screen to trick and kill him.

Gab came up with an elaborate scheme and executed it. He let the detective agency “retrieve” the weapon so they would let their guard down. He had to remain vigilant at all times, and he made sure not to have any direct contact with Dazai. Even something as insignificant as bumping shoulders with Dazai would destroy Gab.

Eventually, the opportunity arose. Gab waited for the moment when Dazai had just figured out the truth—the instant he let his guard down, he stabbed Dazai with his knife. There would be nothing left to fear once Dazai’s heart stopped. Gab would be able to use his skill once Dazai was dead, and he would be able to travel back into the past the moment Wells died as well. That alone would cement his victory.

He wouldn’t hold back the next time they met. He would kill the detectives the instant they stepped onto the island next time. That way, there would be no one else who could threaten him. He would be able to live on forever. That was the only thing Gab wanted. Gab wasn’t human. He didn’t understand human instinct. Only his soul’s cry for survival deeply carved itself into his heart, just like all other life-forms.



Atsushi opened his eyes to the sound of the wind. It was bright, unlike the darkness of the underground.

Why am I here? I was just watching Gab’s past.

The odd feeling that he wasn’t himself was still fresh in his mind. He was disoriented. He had no sense of balance. His body wouldn’t move. Eventually, he realized the reason he couldn’t move wasn’t because of the experience he’d just had. His arms and legs were constrained. He physically wasn’t able to move. His body was stuck inside what appeared to be a wall of some sorts. Only his face, chest, and shoulders protruded from the wall. He couldn’t move any other parts of his body. It was as if he were stuck inside hardened plaster. He appeared to be trapped inside a giant pillar.

If I can’t move, then that means this isn’t part of the dream. This is reality.

“Didja have a good dream, Matasaburo?”

Atsushi heard a voice coming from ahead. He lifted his gaze, only to discover he was in the sky. Gab was comfortably perched on a throne made of rubble in midair.

“Where am I...?”

“Looks like you learned all sorts of new things while you were

underground. So what didja think?"

"What did I think?" instinctively repeated Atsushi.

They were on the very top of the clock tower. The ground had risen in an unbelievable fashion, cocooning the clock tower as if it were climbing toward the sky. Atsushi and Gab were at the top, and Atsushi was buried inside a pillar in the center of the platform in the shape of a round table.

Atsushi wondered, *I'm nothing more than a hindrance to Gab. He would be in trouble if I resurrected Dazai, after all. Why wouldn't he just kill me now that I know the truth? It doesn't make any sense.*

"Cause you're the first person to ever know who I was." Gab shrugged. "It's a long story, and nobody would believe me even if I told 'em. Even if they did, they'd just forget once I reset time. That's why..."

That's why he didn't kill me.

Atsushi suddenly understood. Gab wanted someone he could share this with. He wanted someone who could value him.

"That's funny," Atsushi couldn't help saying. "How human of you. All by yourself, feeling *lonely*...and you're not even human."

"Lonely?" Gab curiously tilted his head. "Huh. Is that what this is? Am I lonely? Even though I've always had tons of people by my side?"

"Exactly," Atsushi replied firmly. "I mean, look—" He attempted to explain himself, but he couldn't find the words.

Of course Gab was lonely. He had only just sprung to life, yet nobody could share this experience with him. He lived in a loop all by himself.

"Stop doing this," pleaded Atsushi. "It's not gonna amount to anything. The end will come for you one way or another. If you think you'll be able to live forever through repeating the past, you're dead wrong."

"The end will come for me?" Gab raised an eyebrow. "Course it will. Even you humans all die at some point. I'm no different. What if I told you to stop living because you were 'just gonna die anyway'? You're a funny guy, Matasaburo."

After laughing, Gab turned his gaze to Atsushi's side. "Wouldn't you agree?"

Atsushi looked beside him in surprise. He hadn't noticed until now, but there was another pillar next to him with someone stuck inside it just as he was.

"Absurd." Atsushi heard a familiar voice. "Those who survive aren't those with reasons to exist. They are the strong ones."

It was Akutagawa. Only his face, shoulders, and chest were visible; the rest of his body was stuck inside the pillar. The corner of

his mouth was ripped, and blood was running down his forehead. Not even Akutagawa was a match against Gab's skill.

"I guess you're right," agreed Gab. "In other words, I, one of the strong, deserve to live more than you two."

"Don't make me laugh," snorted Akutagawa. He then looked over at Atsushi. "Man-Tiger, this brat told me what was going on," Akutagawa said, squinting. "Dazai's about to die?"

"Yeah. We don't have much time."

"What a fool. Joining the detective agency was a mistake."

"You're sure one to talk." Atsushi furrowed his brow. "Look at the sad state the Port Mafia's hellhound is in."

"My skill doesn't work on him," said Akutagawa, a hint of emotion creeping into his voice. "My blades appear to go right through him. What kind of trick is this?"

They go right through him...

"I see," replied Atsushi. "That's the boss's skill—the power to go through anything under two inches. Gab must've absorbed the skill from the boss's body after he died. Your thin fabric won't be able to touch him no matter how hard you try."

"Tch." Akutagawa clicked his tongue. "Then it appears your fists are the only things that will work."

He was right. Atsushi's tiger fists would be big enough to land a blow. But as long as his arms were stuck...

"Hnnng...!"

Atsushi used all the muscle he had to break free, but he still couldn't pull his body out. He didn't even budge.

"You're wasting your time," said Gab with a smile. "I mixed a special type of ore in it as well. This skill was originally the power to freely manipulate the shape of my body, and since the island itself is now part of me, I can move anything and everything on this island... And now I have a good idea about what you can do, too. You're not strong enough to break free."

Gab was right. Even though he could break a boulder with his claws, there was no way for Atsushi to escape this pillar through brute force alone...which meant he had to gamble on his only other choice. It was something he truly didn't want to have to resort to, but...

"Akutagawa," said Atsushi with a scowl. "Dazai's in an underground room near the clock tower. He's on the brink of death, but he can still be saved if we can get the agency's doctor Yosano over to heal him. Can you do that?"

"Coming to me for help?" scoffed Akutagawa. "That must be the most foolish thing you have done since you stepped foot on this island. I would have already escaped if I could."

Akutagawa's black overcoat writhed before almost instantly

transforming into countless black blades that sliced the pillar he was trapped in into pieces, thus freeing him. But a moment later, the pieces reattached themselves and hardened like a video playback. Akutagawa was thereupon trapped once again, hardly even getting the chance to move. The pillars regenerated too fast. Even if they destroyed them, they would be captured before they got away.

“What an aggravating skill. Even if I wanted to kill him, Rashomon wouldn’t be able to reach him from here,” Akutagawa bitterly spat. “You win, brat. Kill me.”

“Kill you?” Gab cocked his head. “I toldja—I don’t plan on killing you. I just wanna talk until time runs out. Y’know, kill time till Matasaburo’s mentor is dead.”

So he plans on leaving us up here crucified until Dazai dies...

Once Dazai and Wells died, Gab would be able to steal the skill to go back in time. Then, after going back in time, he would simply have to kill everyone in the Armed Detective Agency, and then no one would ever be able to stop him again.

“I won’t let you do that,” said Atsushi, his expression stiffening. “I won’t let Dazai die. And I’m sure this isn’t how he wanted to die, either.”

Dazai always wanted to die. Nobody knew why. All I know is that I’d never be able to forgive myself if I let him go like this.

Akutagawa’s lips suddenly curled in a mocking manner.

“Nobody knows what’s going on in Dazai’s head,” said Akutagawa as he looked at Atsushi. “Even I have my reasons for wanting him to live, but nothing you do will ever reach him.”

“Are you... Are you saying you’re okay with Dazai dying?” asked Atsushi as he glared at Akutagawa.

“No. I am saying you do not understand a thing. You are not qualified to save him.”

“Not qualified?” Atsushi barked back. “I don’t know what you’re saying, but if this is about who between the two of us is more capable, then it’s me. Besides, I’ve already beaten you once in a fight!”

Akutagawa looked at Atsushi, then stared off into space before looking at him one more time. His lips pulled to the side as a fiendish smirk curled them.

“How humorous,” Akutagawa smugly replied. “Telling jokes even at a time like this, Man-Tiger. We are not in the same situation right now. Do you understand that? There are things I can do that you cannot.”

The wind howled. Akutagawa’s dark blade pierced Atsushi’s throat.

“Gwah...?!”

“Such as this. You cannot do anything to me, but I can kill you.

You shall regret your lies in death.”

The blade stuck in Atsushi’s throat split into numerous needles that spread throughout the inside of Atsushi’s body. The pain caused Atsushi’s eyes to roll back into his head, but he had no way to resist. It felt as if each one of his nerves was being filed down with sandpaper.

Atsushi screamed, “Akutagawa...! You—!!”

As his vision became red, he somehow managed to turn his gaze to Akutagawa. Right as Atsushi was about to hurl curses at him, he realized Akutagawa’s expression had changed. He wasn’t smiling. The smirk from a moment ago had completely vanished. Instead, there was only silence. There may have even been a hint of sorrow as he looked at Atsushi. Before Atsushi could even wonder what the expression meant, the dark blade went even deeper into him, rendering him unconscious.



When was that, again? I can’t remember what happened around that time. I can’t even remember the season. All I remember is the rich, orange sunset.

Crows were cawing in the distance. Smoke from someone’s cooking rose from a few houses.

Atsushi and Dazai were walking through the residential area downtown.

I can hardly remember why I was walking with Dazai that day. I think I was having a tough time at work, so Dazai came to help. He ended up solving the issue in just a few minutes and walked away as the client profusely thanked him.

Atsushi plodded behind Dazai while watching his back. He didn’t know what to say. His sense of uselessness was dragging him down. The fact that he would never be perfect like Dazai, no matter how many years went by, weighed heavily on his shoulders.

“Perfect”?

Dazai wasn’t perfect. Realizing that stopped Atsushi in his tracks. Dazai was the opposite of perfect. He would always neglect his work, so Kunikida would yell at him, and he always searched for different painless methods to kill himself but failed every time and caused a lot of trouble for everyone. He was eccentric, but everyone was used to him doing random things to the point that nobody thought it was weird anymore.

“Dazai,” Atsushi said from behind him, “why do you want to kill yourself?”

Dazai turned around and looked at Atsushi. It was his usual smile—a cheerful smirk that made him impossible to read. Dazai slightly opened his eyes as if to say, “Oh yeah. I guess I haven’t told you yet.”

He grinned and answered:

“Because I .”

What did Dazai say that day? The more I try to remember, the further these distant memories sink into the glow of the evening sun.

Nobody could understand Dazai. Even if he appeared to be close by, he was millions of light years away.

Atsushi honestly didn't know if he should even save him or not because nobody knew what he desired. Perhaps he was only doing this for himself. Perhaps it was out of selfishness.

However...

A tiger roared. Atsushi responded. The pain shooting throughout his body reversed course. His blood audibly flowed backward in his veins. His fur stood up, his muscles expanded, and each one of his cells was on fire. His body went through an unworldly transformation. He had to move forward. If he didn't understand, then he had to find out why. This wasn't supposed to be how it all ended.

Atsushi howled so powerfully that it felt as if it could have reached the moon.

“Good,” said a voice. “Now hurry. Do not waste my time, Man-Tiger.”



Radial cracks ran down the pillar before it exploded into tiny fragments.

“What?!”

The fragments immediately began to connect and regenerate, but the man who was once trapped inside was already gone. A white wind sailed past. A tiger landed on the round table platform, then jumped once more. The round table crumbled, unable to endure the extraordinary power of the beast's legs.

“What is...going on?” yelled Gab. His eyes couldn't keep up with the white tiger's blinding speed. “What's going on?! This is a skill? That's...!”

Gab waved his hand, creating a legion of storm arms around himself for defense. The white tiger stopped, bent his massive body the size of a small car, and roared. The island shook. The powerful shock wave from his mouth vibrated the stone arms like tuning forks until they exploded.



“Huh?!” Gab’s eyes opened wide in astonishment. “I-impossible! Th-that’s—!”

But he couldn’t even get a chance to finish his sentence. The white tiger soared through the rubble from the stone arms as it rained upon them and bit down on Gab’s shoulder.

“Gaaaaaah!”

The tiger’s large teeth sank into Gab’s flesh, piercing bone before going right through his sternum. Each fang was thicker than Gab’s wrist—which was over two inches thick. In other words, the boss’s skill wouldn’t work. The tiger then landed on the ground with Gab still in his mouth. He shook his head. The sound of flesh being torn, tendons being snapped, and joints being pulled apart followed.

“H-how dare you...! Who do you think I am?!”

Gab caught on to one of his stone arms with his legs, regained his footing, and pulled his shoulder away from the tiger with a scream. Blood and flesh spewed into the air. He then used a stone arm to grab and immediately pull away his own body.

“Mn...!”

Gab’s shoulder was gone. Fresh blood sprayed out of his wound.

“I won’t die... I’m not gonna die...!”

A stone arm covered the exposed flesh and bone where his shoulder once was. It closed the wound and stopped the bleeding.

“I’ve been conscious ever since my master, Verne, controlled this body—but I couldn’t say anything. My voice reached no one. I was neither alive nor dead. I was just alone in lukewarm darkness, wondering who I was.”

The stone arm merged with Gab’s shoulder and sprouted a new arm. This new appendage composed of rock, mineral, and machine was almost like Atsushi’s tiger arms in a way.

“I won’t go back to the darkness! I am going to live! Is it really so wrong of me to want to live?!”

The ground the tiger was firmly stepping onto melted with Gab’s cry. It wasn’t just where he was standing, either. The ground under Gab, the pillar holding Akutagawa, the cylinder foundation curled around the clock tower—everything dissolved into mud, and all that mud rushed toward the white tiger.

“Die!!”

The mass of mud surrounding the tiger lumped into a ball before hardening into a boulder around the size of the clock tower itself. It hovered in the air with the tiger trapped inside.

“Eat...shit...!”

Since Gab used everything to create the boulder, there was nothing left to even hold him up. Not even he would be okay if he hit

the ground from that height, but Gab's smile conveyed firm belief that he had won. He stared at the boulder as he fell, but his expression soon froze over. A crack ran down the surface of the giant rock.

"No... You've gotta be kidding me..."

The crack instantly spread throughout the entire boulder. Gab could hear something cracking away at the rock from inside. He heard a roar as well. All of a sudden, a hole opened in the boulder as if it had taken a direct hit from a cannonball. The white tiger leaped out. He swung his front claws at Gab, who couldn't dodge as he was falling to the ground.

"Damn you...!"

The attack connected, creating a shock wave in the air and slamming Gab right into the earth. The ground rumbled, and all the surrounding buildings collapsed. After a few moments went by, the sound turned into a wall of air, causing the nearby trees to rustle. The scale of the destruction went far beyond what was possible in hand-to-hand combat. Radial fissures ran across the surface as if an asteroid had hit the earth.

When the rising smoke faded, Gab was lying in the center of the cracks. His stomach had split open from the white tiger's punch. His body was riddled with wounds, causing him to bleed everywhere—serious injuries that would have killed any ordinary human many times over.

The tiger soon landed on the surface as well. Smoke rose into the air as if he were evaporating while transforming back into Atsushi. He then lifelessly collapsed, having exhausted all his mental energy. Atsushi looked at Gab. He was feebly breathing in a pool of his own blood.

"Not...bad..."

"It's over," declared Atsushi in a hoarse voice. "You've repeated this moment hundreds of thousands of times. You've lived long enough, right? Stop your skill and let me go save Dazai."

"Heh...heh-heh... 'Enough'? What d'you mean, 'enough'?"

Gab got onto his knees and tried to stand up. Copious amounts of blood poured out of his mouth and chest, painting the ground crimson.

"I am here... I am alive right now... It will never be enough! There will never be enough breathing, thinking, hearing, talking, seeing—never enough of being with friends! There'll never be a time when I just say, 'Eh, guess I'm good!' And you're no different!"

The ground below Gab began to shake as a machine emerged from underground. Covered in dirt was an experimental power generator from the island's basement. Cooling tubes, conduction wiring, superconducting electromagnets—every piece of equipment on the

island, including material, was under Gab's control.

"Having friends is no different... My master, Verne, had the Seven Traitors! They fought for a common goal and shared time together! I wanted the same thing! That's why I joined the band of thieves! That's why I became the boss's disciple!"

The tubes and wires wrapped around Gab's wounded flesh like a snake, then began devouring his flesh.

"What?!"

Gab's arm was torn off, and insulated wires latched on to his exposed arteries. His lungs were then crushed before gradually connecting to the tubes of an air circulation device.

"I don't need this beat-up bag of flesh anymore. I can keep using my skill as long as my brain still works." Gab smirked. "I am me! My heart and mind aren't going anywhere!"

His bones, his organs—each part of him was being tossed away, splattering on the ground. Every piece of him below the neck was gradually replaced with a mechanical equivalent.

"Gab, you're right. You are you, and nobody can get in the way of your desire to live."

Gab had gotten rid of every last human part of himself. His bones were steel bars, his muscles were twisted conduits, his blood vessels were red and blue insulated wires, and he was now twice the size he once was. He was neither man nor machine. The living creature stood with half his body buried in the land.

He swung his mechanical arm, which was about the size of Atsushi's entire body, with a deafening roar. Atsushi leaped to the side and dodged before jumping once more into Gab's blind spot. He then threw a punch with his tiger fist into the mechanical body. Wires and conduits snapped, scattering into the air behind him.

"Guh...!"

Since Gab turned his entire body into metal, his movements were slow. The skill itself was weakening.

"But you can't separate humans and their skills. The reason you want friends is nothing more than a reminder from when you were once human. Gifts are lodged deep inside the human soul. You shouldn't remove them."

Gifts and souls.

Just like how Dazai's soul with the gift of an extraordinary brain seeks death...

Just like how Kunikida's soul seeks justice and the president strives to polish his gift as a martial artist...

And just like how Atsushi's soul had suffered because he was born with a gift he didn't even want—a tiger...

"That logic only applies to humans!" screamed Gab.

After merging with the machines, Gab had grown until he was about as big as the clock tower. No matter how many times Atsushi punched him, he immediately regenerated. The only way to defeat him was to go after the only human part of his body left: his head. Using the massive mechanical organism as a platform, Atsushi sprinted up Gab's body. The massive tree-like arms swung his way, but he dodged each attack as he continued to reach the top.

He threw a swift punch, cutting through the wind, but his hand hit something extremely hard that was blocking Atsushi from reaching Gab's vitals.

This is one of the shutters from the gold-coin area!

"I don't need freedom—I don't need joy! I just want to live. Just let me live!"

Gab smiled, pale-faced. A trickle of blood ran down the side of his lips.

Crap!

When Atsushi hit the shutter, it recoiled, knocking him backward. He didn't have anywhere to step.

I'm gonna fall—!

But out of nowhere, a black fabric appeared underneath, stretching from the surface. It became a platform for him to stand on and supported his weight. Quietly looking up at Atsushi from the surface was Akutagawa. His gaze quietly said, "Finish it. Bring him peace."

"...!"

Atsushi kicked off the black fabric and sprang back into the air. With a twist of his body, he leaped over the shutter, landed inside, and jumped once more toward Gab.

"Haaaaaaaah!"

Right as his fist was about to connect...

—I owe ya one.

...he heard the young man's voice.

The fist went through the machine, and shattered metal shot in the opposite direction.

The impact sent the machine body towering backward. Countless parts blocked out the sky as they dropped to the surface. Atsushi felt as if he saw Gab faintly smirk on the other side of the mechanical rain, but he was in no position to check. Numerous machines collapsed to the earth along with Atsushi, depleted of his last bit of energy. When he hit the ground, he immediately lost consciousness.

Everything turned black. Swallowed in darkness.



“Atsushi! Atsushi, wake up!”

Someone was calling him on the other side of the blur. They grabbed his shoulder and sternly shook him.

“...Mn...”

“Atsushi! Are you okay?!”

Atsushi managed to open his eyes. He saw a face on the other side of the blur, but his eyes wouldn’t focus.

“Kunikida...,” Atsushi said in a hoarse voice. “What about the island...? And Dazai...?”

“The island stopped attacking once that giant boulder appeared. We were finally able to get over here after that. Kenji and Tanizaki are heading to the underground bunker with Yosano right now.”

How long was I unconscious?

Atsushi managed to lift his head and look at the clock tower with his blurred vision. The edifice was warped, but it seemed to still be working. The time was 1:10 PM. There were still four minutes left according to the time limit Wells gave him. Kenji should be able to forcibly open the door to the underground bunker, and they should make it in time.

“What about Akutagawa...?”

“Is Akutagawa nearby?” asked Kunikida as he looked around. “There’s nobody else here. More importantly, Atsushi, where’s the enemy?”

Half-buried in machine parts, Atsushi gazed into the sky—the endless blue sky.

“Gab...disappeared,” he answered. “He probably no longer exists in this world. He returned to the darkness where his master waits.”

Kunikida helped Atsushi up, and they struggled along off the mountain of machines.

“Kunikida,” muttered Atsushi, “what are skills?”

“Where did that come from?”

“I think a lot of skill users believe their skills are a part of them,” Atsushi said as if answering his own question. “But maybe they’re wrong. Maybe they come from somewhere else and stick to us. Maybe they’re something we can’t understand... I don’t really know how to put it into words, but that’s how I feel.”

“...Focus on your recovery first,” Kunikida suggested after a few moments of silence. “You’ll have plenty of time to think after that.”

All of a sudden, the ground began to shake.

An earthquake? No, couldn’t be. It’s a man-made island. Gab’s skill

should've stopped, too.

"What...?"

Kunikida turned his head in the direction of the noise. Immediately, the wireless transceiver in his pocket began to beep as well.

"W-w-w-w-w-we've got trouble!" shrieked the captain in a panic on the other side of the line. *"Th-th-the ships...! Ahhh!!"*

"Calm down!" Kunikida yelled into the transceiver. "What happened? Where are you? What was that earthquake?!"

"The wharf exploded! The ships, too! And the sea level is rising at the coast! The island is going to sink!"

"What?!"

Sink?

Nobody could escape if the wharf and ships were gone. If the island sank now, everybody on the island, including the guests, would end up on the bottom of the ocean.

"Oh!" Atsushi exclaimed as he remembered what he saw underground. "It's the island's safety mechanism. Gab existed to protect the island's secrets from foreign enemies. The island was designed to destroy itself if he happened to die."

"Then that means... Captain! How much time do we have until the island sinks?!"

"A-a-a-according to the guards' report, we have approximately eight minutes!"

It wasn't enough time. Even if they called the mainland and asked for help, it would still take them thirty minutes at best. Plus, there were many tourists on the island. There was no way they could all survive trying to stay afloat without life jackets for twenty minutes.

"Damn it!" cursed Kunikida. "What the hell is happening to this island?!"

Atsushi suddenly turned his gaze at the sky. "Do you...hear something?" he asked.

"What?"

It wasn't the wind. It wasn't the island sinking, either. Something was descending from the sky with what sounded like a heavy flapping of its wings.

"Hey, that's..."

Kunikida pointed at something up in the air, so Atsushi looked as well. It was a blue aircraft, and it was coming their way. They were greeted by a loud voice.

"Ahhh-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!"

It was a helicopter. Standing in the hatchway with his arms crossed and cackling was...

"Ranpo?" muttered Kunikida, struck dumb with surprise. "And I

believe that's the Division's aircraft used for secret missions. But why...?"

Ranpo's mirthful voice suddenly started coming out of Kunikida's wireless transceiver. He must have tuned in to the specific frequency.

"Ah, what would you guys do without me? What a mess! Dazai sent a video message to my phone a little earlier telling me what was going on, and I figured you guys would be in trouble about now, so I urged the president to let me help! You better thank this amazing detective, you little worker ants!"

Ranpo was another member of the detective agency, and he and Dazai were its two sharpest detectives. Seeing that Dazai told Ranpo what was happening in advance must have meant he predicted the agents were going to be in danger and that something was going to happen to him to prevent him from doing anything himself to help.

Atsushi shook his head.

Even when he's dying, Dazai is still Dazai...

"The coast guard should be there soon with a rescue boat," assured Ranpo on the other side of the transceiver. *"It's big enough for everyone on the island to get on, so don't worry about a thing."*

The helicopter above gradually approached the island. Atsushi squinted as the propeller blew a gust of wind his way. Before the helicopter even landed, a small shadow hopped out from behind Ranpo—who was boastfully standing in the hatchway—and ran straight for Atsushi.

"...Kyouka!"

Robed in a kimono, the young girl with black hair threw her arms around Atsushi, and she buried her face in Atsushi's stomach because she was much shorter.

"...I was worried about you," muttered Kyouka with her face still pressed against Atsushi's abdomen.

"Sorry about that."

Atsushi then suddenly heard another voice carried by the wind.

"It takes true talent to still make a girl cry at that age, Atsushi."

"...?!"

Atsushi turned around. A shadow approached him, hidden in the cloud of dust. He had disheveled hair with a sand-colored overcoat. His bare skin could be seen through the hole in his shirt where he'd been stabbed in the stomach. Closely following behind him were Yosano and the other detectives.

"Dazai!"

"I heard what you did. I can't believe you would resuscitate me just when I had finally managed to die! Just terrible. Do you know how much it hurts getting stabbed, by the way? Oh, and I heard you guys had been discussing how to bring me back to life behind my

back, too. Now I'll have to come up with a new plan to kill myself. But —"

"DAZAAAAAAAI!"

"Oof?!"

Kunikida drop-kicked Dazai from the side, nearly breaking him in two and sending him flying to the ground.

"HOW...MANY TIMES...ARE YOU GOING TO...SCREW UP THE JOB...BECAUSE YOU CAN'T SIT STILL?!? DO YOU KNOW HOW MUCH...WE HAD TO GO THROUGH...TO BRING YOU BACK TO LIFE...?!?!"

"Ow, ow, ow, ow, ow! Kunikida, please stop kicking and choking and yelling at me!"

"The hell are you talking about?! 'Finally managed to die'? You're no longer human! You don't deserve that right! If you really want to die that much, I'll kill you myself! How about this?! And this?! How about from this angle?!"

Nobody even attempted to stop Kunikida as he pinned Dazai to the ground and choked him. Everyone simply watched over them in relief.

I just had a thought...

I wonder if Verne's friends and comrades, the Seven Traitors, were like this with each other, too? When the guardian Verne disappeared and the skill life-form Gab was born, Gab joined the band of thieves in search of friends. But Gab could only be with them by repeating those first moments, so maybe he was never able to feel the bond that his master felt with the Seven Traitors. If Gab had friends like Verne did or like I do with the detective agency, then maybe things wouldn't have had to end this way.

Atsushi turned around and looked at the pile of machines. Nobody could answer his question. Only the hot summer breeze of the ocean blew over the rubble. Atsushi alternately visualized the quiet-mannered young man Verne and the wide-eyed, energetic boy Gab until they disappeared into the cerulean sky.

...Summer's still far from over.



The fan in the office stirred the lukewarm heat in the room. The sunlight diagonally peeking through the windows painted the floor white. The indoor plants bobbed their heads with the faint breeze.

"It's...soooooo...hottttt..." A detective lay forward onto his desk like a popsicle melting. "Why did the air conditioner have to break now of all times...?"

"Someone's apparently coming to repair it at noon."

"I'm gonna be a puddle by then."

The usual members were gathered at the office that day: Dazai, Atsushi, Tanizaki, Kenji, Ranpo, Yosano, and Kyouka. Only Kyouka seemed cool; she didn't sweat even a drop, and she stared at her overheated colleagues in wonder.

"Ugh! We have all these elite detectives, and there's still nothing we can do about this?!" Ranpo cried in despair. "Is there seriously nobody here who can cool the place down with their skill?!"

Everyone exchanged glances.

"It feels like there'd be... But there isn't."

"Ugh..." Ranpo fell prostrate over his desk. "That does it. Let's all go somewhere to cool off. It can be the president's way of thanking us for our efforts on Standard Island."

"I like that idea," replied Tanizaki after lifting his head. "But where exactly would we go?"

"I like the mountains," Dazai muttered to himself.

"Yes, the mountains would be nice," agreed Atsushi with a nod.

"I agree. The higher the elevation, the cooler it's going to be," added Kunikida.

"You can't be serious," Ranpo chimed in. "You go to the beach when you wanna beat the heat."

"No more oceans!" everyone shouted in unison.

After taking note of each member's haggard stare, Ranpo stood up unenthusiastically. "Hmph. Suit yourselves," he pouted. Ranpo hadn't had a chance to enjoy the ocean, since he wasn't on the case. "I'll be cooling off at the café on the first floor. Tanizaki, Kenji, follow me. It's my treat."

"Our pleasure."

Ranpo, Tanizaki, and Kenji retired from the office together.

"Man... I could really go for some matcha ice cream from Uzumaki, too, right now..." muttered Dazai as he watched them leave.

"You've got work to do!" Kunikida barked while tossing a stack of paperwork on Dazai's desk. "You need to finish your report of Standard Island, and make it snappy. The Division is growing impatient."

"Whaaat?" complained Dazai, clearly put out. "I mean, I guess I could do it, but... Kunikida, do you have any way I could cool off? Like with your skill?"

"I know a way you could really cool off, but it doesn't have anything to do with my skill. Want to give it a try?"

"Wait—really? How?"

"Stop your heart for two minutes, then let me resuscitate you."

"...I regret everything." Dazai stared at Kunikida with reproach. "I've already had enough of being revived right before I think I'm

finally gonna be able to die. Fine, I'll write the report. Would that make you happy? Atsushi, hand me those files."

"Oh, okay."

Atsushi promptly stood up, began shuffling through the papers, then pulled out the documents the agents compiled. The first thing he noticed was a picture attached to the cover.

"Huh?" said Atsushi. "Is this...?"

"Oh, you haven't seen it yet? Those are the post-findings of the investigation."

The picture showed scraps of metal littered across the island coast, but Atsushi saw something familiar among the weather-beaten metal. It was a black briefcase. The clasp was broken, and the mechanism inside had been destroyed. It was so thoroughly ruined to the point that only those who knew what it once was would be able to tell what they were looking at.

"That was the one thing I wanted to check before leaving the island, so I got everyone to help me find it." Dazai shrugged. "It was completely broken beyond repair, probably a little past noon right after it was stolen from the fifth basement floor."

Gab was the one who stole it...which means...

"That kid had no intention of ever using the weapon," Dazai said, shrugging again. "He probably stole it to destroy it so that nobody—not us nor the Special Division for Unusual Powers—could get their hands on it. He was just trying to stop the weapon in his own way. But, well, I figured as much."

The island's guardian...

Even after the man Verne ceased to exist and gave life to the pure skill life-form, Gab continued to be the guardian of the island. Perhaps that was the predestined role he had been given before birth, and his reason for existence as well.

"By the way...", began Atsushi as if he suddenly remembered something. "I asked Kunikida to look into the colonel's past, but...we never figured out the secret the colonel wanted the public to know. Did you manage to figure it out?"

— "Noon was the time my men were given orders to attack. By our own headquarters, even.

— "But it was all just a scheme to turn them into war criminals—traitors. They ran for their lives while people called them the Mimic soldiers, and eventually...they drifted to Yokohama and died in vain, from what I hear."

Atsushi got help from other detectives, looked into past incidents and the colonel's history, and even received assistance from private detective agencies abroad to look into records of wars that matched what the colonel had said. But he couldn't find a thing. There were no

records of the colonel's troops being made into traitors or any foreign former military parties dying in Yokohama.

"You won't find anything," Dazai suddenly said while turning his gaze out the window. "The Division made sure to completely cover it up. You won't find any records of their deaths, nor will you even find a single photo accidentally taken of them as they were walking around town. The Division is good at jobs like that, after all."

"Dazai, do you know anything about them?"

But Dazai didn't say a word as he stared at a point in the sky with an elbow resting on the table. It was as if his eyes weren't focused on the scenery outside but were watching vivid memories playing back in his mind.

"I feel bad for the colonel, but there's no reason to dig up the past and disclose to the public what happened to them," Dazai revealed in a flat voice. "They died satisfied. Now is their time to rest."

Atsushi felt as if he could see the white smoke of a cigarette rising in Dazai's eyes. Was he just seeing things? Atsushi's mouth opened and closed, unable to put into words what he needed to ask until...

"Is now a good time?" Naomi asked, standing at their side. "One of our regulars from the museum sent us a request."

"What is it?" Kunikida turned around and took the files Naomi was holding out. "An escort request? Well, that's sudden."

After running his eyes through the file, Kunikida turned his gaze to Atsushi.

"Atsushi, get ready. We have a job to do. It appears some thieves left a calling card."

A calling card? Well, that's pretty old-fashioned...

"The thieves were witnessed checking the place out when the calling card was found. One was a large, bald man, while the other appeared to be a middle-aged businessman."

"Huh?"

Could it be?

"I know what you're thinking, but it's probably just a coincidence. There's no way those two are alive. You saw their bodies."

He had a point. Their wounds were clearly fatal, and they didn't look at all alive. Plus, Gab stole the boss's skill and was using it. He could only absorb skills from people who died on the island.

——*"I really do respect the guy. He gave me something important."*

Gab... The living skill just born...

Why did Gab kill Virgo and the boss? Back on the island, I thought maybe Virgo had learned something he shouldn't have when he was hacking into the information terminal, but now that I think about it, Gab would've been able to neutralize him without killing him. Cruelly slitting his throat didn't seem like something Gab would do.

Plus, Gab was supposedly able to use multiple skills through absorbing the skills of others, but he only ever showed two of them: the one that made him look young and the one that allowed him to manipulate the stone arms. During those fourteen years of accumulating skills, if he'd absorbed the power to resurrect someone after putting them in a state of suspended animation or something like that, then that'd explain the contradiction. But if he'd actually had a skill like that, then Gab would've never intended to kill anyone in the first place—



“Atsushi, you there?” Kunikida’s voice suddenly dragged Atsushi back into reality. “Come on. Let’s go.”

“O-okay!”

Atsushi quickly followed behind Kunikida. He glanced at Dazai on the way out, but Dazai just smiled and shrugged without saying a word.

I’ll never know what Gab’s true intentions were, but I’ll be able to find out if the boss and Virgo are alive once I solve this case. All that other stuff can wait until afterward. And if the boss really is the thief, I already know how to catch him.

Once he opened the door to the detective agency, a cool breeze suddenly came fluttering inside and blew through the office.

Summer was still far from over—and life even more so. What were skills? What were Gab’s true intentions? Atsushi had so many questions, and the road to the answers seemed to go on forever. But perhaps Kunikida was right: Atsushi still had plenty of time to think. He had friends he could count on as well. As long as he kept moving forward, there would come a day when he would reach the answer.

After walking outside, Atsushi was met with vivid-white cumulonimbus clouds in the sky. The brilliant sunlight drenched the emerald-green trees and reflected off their leaves.

“I owe you one.”

Atsushi turned around at the sound of the sudden voice to find a familiar individual standing under a tree.

“Wells!” Atsushi gushed with a smile. “You’re okay!”

“Thanks to you I was able to erase the embarrassment of getting stabbed from my life. You have my gratitude... Now, I heard that the military police have given orders to the Armed Detective Agency to arrest me, an international terrorist. Is that true?”

“Yes. Kunikida received a written request earlier,” Atsushi said as he thought back to it. “But he immediately tore it up and threw it away.”

“I see.” Wells closed her eyes and smiled. “Well, I should be on my way to the next catastrophe. As I will continue to do until I draw my last breath and am forgotten in the flow of time...”

“Please at least say hello to everyone before you go.” Atsushi looked at Kunikida walking up ahead. “Kunikida’s right over there. I’m sure the others would love to see you as...”

Atsushi turned his gaze back to Wells and froze. Nobody was there. All that was present was the sunlight filtering through the trees, creating stripe patterns in the air. Atsushi continued staring at the empty space.

He suddenly had a thought: *What if Wells the time traveler never existed in the first place? Could the ability to manipulate time itself have been nothing more than the result of something like a summer shadow meddling with everyone's timeline?*

A skill that manifested as a shadow...

Atsushi wasn't sure how much of the world was actually there and how much of it was merely a shadow, but all one could do was move forward. Atsushi opened his mouth to say something, only to decide against it, and then ran over to catch up with Kunikida.

It was a long, endless road.

AFTERWORD

What did you think of *Bungo Stray Dogs*, Volume 4? I know I'm repeating myself here, and perhaps it's a little late to mention this, but each of the plots in Volumes 1 through 4 are independent with their own timelines that follow different protagonists, meaning you can start reading them in any order. So if you accidentally purchased the fourth volume first, there's nothing to worry about.

Now, there were a few differences in *55 Minutes* compared with the other three novels. Did you notice them?

First, the protagonist was Atsushi. Each of the first three volumes were side stories that took place before the events of the manga, each told from the viewpoints of different protagonists, but this time, the story revolved around Atsushi. In addition, this volume didn't take place in the past, but rather sometime after the tenth volume of the manga. In other words, it's a tale about the "usual" detective agency in novel format.

Second, the season was clearly described as summer. In fact, seasons have never actually been mentioned flat out in the manga and novels up until now. Instead, they have simply been sprinkled with hints. They could have been spring or fall, but this time, it was made clear that it was a hot summer day. Why? Well, I won't exactly say why just in case you haven't read the book yet, but when a certain skill activated, I really felt as if it was during a hot season—a boiling summer day under the clear blue sky. I wonder why I felt that way? Regardless, that's just how it is.

Finally, the subtitle is in English: *55 Minutes*. Even my editor said I should choose a Japanese subtitle so it would match the first three volumes, but I switch randomly between English and Japanese subtitles in the manga, so I said it felt natural going with English this time, and after some persuasion, it worked. To tell the truth, I just said the first thing that came to my mind, though. (I've been getting good at employing sophisms since I started this work; maybe that's the only thing I'm getting good at.)

Anyway, I tried out a lot of new things in Volume 4. I hope you can enjoy the main story in the manga while taking delight in learning more about other characters in the novel as if you were watching a movie based on the series.

And last but not least, I would like to thank Katou, the editor for the manga; Shirahama, the editor for the novels; and Sango Harukawa for always drawing such stylish illustrations for the covers and interior illustrations. I would also like to thank everyone from the printers to the booksellers, and those of you who've read the novels! Thank you so much.

Until we meet again.

KAFKA ASAGIRI

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